***“Discipleship From A Pastor’s Perspective”***

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**Introduction**

In giving the pastoral perspective of discipleship, I want to discuss three crucial areas of discipleship.

First, there is a question that must to be addressed by everyone who claims the name of Christ: *“Am I a nominal Christian –* Christian in name only *– or a true disciple of Christ?”*

Then there is the message – *the presentation of the Gospel* – that is preached, taught and spoken by true believers to a lost world and the importance of its accuracy.

And, finally, the life of the local church in creating and keeping a healthy atmosphere for believers in Christ to grow and create more disciples.

**NOMINAL CHRISTIAN OR TRUE DISCIPLE OF CHRIST?**

**A Question That Needs To Be Addressed**

Unfortunately, there are many who claim to be a *“Christian*,*”* but their lifestyle nullifies those claims.

**The Nationality Christian**: There are some who view their Christianity as they view their nationality. They were “born” into the family of God at birth.

They feel they are guaranteed a place in heaven based on the faithful Christian life of their parents or grandparents. Possibly their parents or grandparents played a part in founding a local church or took part in the leadership of the said church.

And because of those “faithful saints,” these view themselves as a Christian and have no doubts about their salvation.

**The Fair-weather Christian**: Then there are those who wear the title *“Christian”* depending on how they feel. These are fair-weather Christians.

One day their life in Christ is their focus and desire, but the next day *“the problems of life”* or *“the pleasures of life”* crowd out any thoughts of God and living for Him. This charade of Christian living is like “worshipping” a rising politician or famed athlete, only to have the devotion turn sour when the politician or athlete falters.

In all of life’s ups and downs, though, they feel God is pleased with their efforts so they give no real thought of true and consistent discipleship.

**The “Great Events” Christian**: When it comes to the “great events” in life – such as one’s marriage, the dedication of one’s child or grandchild, or the death of a loved one – some expect (and at times demand) God’s approval, blessing, and comfort.

But other than these events, God is not invited nor welcomed into their life. God is, so to speak, looked upon as their *“good luck”* charm and nothing more.

Even in death, it seems today, everyone’s right with God. I’m not trying to be insensitive, but does not every obituary that speaks of the final destination of the deceased allude to heaven or the arms of Jesus? I’ve never read an obituary where the decease died and went to Hell. And, truth be told, I would be saddened to read such an obituary. But we must understand that heaven is only for those who are true disciples of Christ.

**The “Lord’s Day” Christian**: Finally, there are those who claim to be a Christian based on their “faithfulness” in church attendance and activities performed. And though they attend church faithfully, they do so out of duty and not out of love for God and a desire to be with God’s people.

They say and do all the *“right things,”* and may even hold a position in the church. Yet their lifestyle and behavior outside the church is no different than those who lay no claim to the name of Christ.

These are nominal “Christians” – people who are Christian in name only, which makes them unbelievers. It is not God they truly serve and worship, but their own dreams and desires.

Some years ago, the motto for the National was ***“Belief Behaves.”*** And that is true of all – what one truly believes is modeled in one’s behavior.

Now Peter reminds us that it is not God’s will ‘that any should perish but ﻿that all should come to repentance’ (2 Peter 3:9b).

But if these nominal “Christians” (unbelievers) refuse to become obedient to the call of Christ Jesus to repent and put their full trust in Him, they will never hear the words, *“Well done, good and faithful servant.”*

God’s will for the nominal “Christian” is to cease playing games and get serious about God’s will and work for their life. Truly the nominal “Christian” is fooling no one but themselves.

Dr. Picirilli, in his book, ***“DISCIPLESHIP: The Expression of Saving Faith”***, describes a true Christian, a true disciple of Christ:

What is a disciple, then? One who lays aside every other influence for giving direction to his life and pledges allegiance to Jesus, one who follows where Jesus leads, who enrolls in the school of Jesus and proceeds to learn from Him and put His teachings into practice. No discipleship is less than this. No one really is a Christian who is not such a disciple. 1

Our Lord spoke of true Christianity, true discipleship when He said to His disciples,

*“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (Matthew 16:24-26).

Near the end of Paul’s last letter to the believers in Corinth, he admonishes them, writing,

‘Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, ﻿that Jesus Christ is in you?... ‘ (13:5a).

So we need to examine ourselves and see if the life, we once surrendered to Christ, has been taken back. Even a small part of it. And if so, we must repent and surrender it again, being completely surrendered to God.

We must examine ourselves and see if we have become slack in our walk with Christ? If so, we must repent and become obedient to God’s will for our life. Neglecting to do so, results in our own peril.

**THE PRESENTATION OF THE GOSPEL**

With causal Christianity prevailing, we need to ask ourselves why this is the case.

    In the opening of Dr. Picirilli's book, we are confronted with the problem and what has aided in its existence:

We have a problem.  Far too many members of our churches find it far too easy to live without clear evidence of their faith.

Then he goes on to say:

Why does this state of affairs prevail? I’m not entirely sure, but I suspect that we who have preached and taught the church bear a large part of the blame. One possibility is we have made it much too easy to wear the name **Christian**. 2

There are other quotes where the church and its leaders are pointed out as having allowed for this sordid lifestyle in the church. And I quote:

Our churches (if they are instrumental in bringing people to Christ at all!) can bear full witness to a succession of people who “accept Christ,” are baptized, and join the church – and soon return to the sort of lives they led before, lives of indifference if not outright wickedness. The tragedy is that many of them at least halfway believe they are saved, and we helped them to that conclusion! 3

… I am convinced that both in personal work and in our preaching we need to present the gospel call to a faith that expresses itself in repentance and in the obedience that demonstrates true discipleship.  Indeed, our preaching is the most important presentation of the gospel we make, and it must make clear what Jesus calls us to and what it means to respond to that call in repentance and faith.  Furthermore, the practice of the pastor in all his teaching relationships, whether corporately or individually, must be to model and express discipleship as the only genuine form of Christianity – the *full* gospel, in other words. 4

        Ministers of the gospel who give assurance of salvation to people who are living in sin are guilty of 'spiritual malpractice'... not saying we can always or easily know for sure whether [a] person is truly saved... but for us to separate assurance of eternal life from the truly obedient lifestyle of a disciple is seriously unbiblical. 5

The local church – leaders and members – have a tremendous responsibility in the way the gospel of Jesus Christ is presented, with the accuracy of the gospel being greater than the presentation itself.

The local church must make sure that as the gospel is presented – preached, taught or spoken – accurately, that it is not a watered-down version for the sake of convenience, numerical growth or personal achievement. As Dr. Picirilli puts it, we must make sure we “get the gospel right.” 6

Remember, the growth that ought to be sought after and truly desired is that we ‘grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ (2 Peter 3:18a).

Today, there is a lot of talk about church growth – and that’s ok. But it’s interesting how little the New Testament talks about church growth, and how often it speaks about growing in the ‘Word’.

And, we, as believers, do not need to assume that the basics of the gospel are known. If so, we leave our listeners feeling comfortable living in their sins. To this, Mark Dever writes,

When we assume the Gospel instead of clarifying it, people who profess Christianity but don’t understand or obey the Gospel are cordially allowed to presume their own conversion without examining themselves for evidence of it – which may amount to nothing more than a blissful damnation… Believing the true Gospel, and responding to it in repentance and belief, is the only way to be saved. 7

Those who object and believe that we are making “a mountain out of a mole hill,” triumphantly claim that they are *“winning”* the unbeliever’s friendship and respect (though not winning them to Christ) and that’s good for now.

To this R. Albert Mohler, Jr. replies:

… winning them to what? To true discipleship? To cross-carrying? To self-denial? To separation from the world? To crucifixion of the flesh? To holy living? To nobility of character? To a despising of the world’s treasures? To hard self-discipline? To love for God? To total committal to Christ? Of course, the answer to all these questions is *“no.”* 8

The Gospel of Christ clearly states that we must deny all allegiance to others and even to ourselves, leave all and surrender our life to Christ Jesus. We are to repent of and turn from all our sins, trust in the saving atonement of Christ Jesus and follow Him.

We must present the Gospel of Jesus Christ – in our preaching, teaching, and sharing – clearly and accurately, never assuming that they are well knowledgeable of the Gospel, if we are to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

And in turn, the gospel of Christ must be accepted by faith and lived out in a life of obedience to Him. Faith and obedience - that is the essence of a disciple of Christ.

**THE LIFE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH: Membership and Discipline**

This brings us to last area involving discipleship – the life of the local church.

Life in the local church must be such an atmosphere that believers of Christ are nourished in the Word of God, disciplined when they stray from God’s Word, and taught how to make others disciples of Christ.

As Dr. Picirilli states, the local church ‘ought to be a community of faith, a fellowship of disciples committed to Christ and to one another.’ 9

In discussing the life of the local church there are two issues that need to be addressed.

First, church membership means something and it ought to be taken seriously. Now, church membership is not one’s salvation (as some would believe), but a voluntary commitment to a local body of believers.

A friend recently directed me to Jonathan Leeman’s book, ***“The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love”*** as he defines what it means to belong to a local church:

Belonging to a church isn’t like membership in a wholesale food store such as Price Club or Costco, where membership allows us to purchase whatever discounted items we want. Rather, it means committing to a group of people who will call me to account. It means taking responsibility for others concerning the deepest matters that can be shared between two humans and making ourselves vulnerable in the process. 10

    At a church business meeting, a young woman, in her mid to late 30’s and who had been raised in church all her life, stood and made a public statement regarding her lack of church attendance. She sincerely declared that she and God had *“an understanding, an agreement.”*

She went on to explain how, after a long, grueling week of work, she feels much closer to God at home on the Lord’s Day while catching up on her rest.

I'm sure you have similar stories to tell.

But this is contrary to the Word of God.

The writer of Hebrews, while encouraging their readers to ‘hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering,’ also admonished them to ‘consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another’ (10:23-25a).

We must understand and teach that church membership means something. It means that the members will hold each other accountable for living as disciples. It means working together as each one strives for ‘obedience to the faith’ (Romans 16:26, NKJV). It means that the church will take well-thought out action to discipline a member that has strayed from the teachings of Christ.

The other issue, already alluded to, is church discipline. Many view this subject as negative and confrontational and want no part of it. But church discipline is needed for the health and well-being of the local church.

Just as you would have no desire to spend much time with a family who does not believe in discipline, nor should you desire to be part of a church that **does not** practice church discipline.

We preach and teach that evangelism is taught in God’s Word and embrace the activity, but so is church discipline. Both are vital and valuable to the life of the local church.

Robert Jeffress, compares evangelism and church discipline in his book, ***“Grace Gone Wild”***:

Evangelism and church discipline are different strategies to accomplish the same goal: producing a group of men and women – disciples – who live under the rule of Jesus Christ. Evangelism focuses on freeing unbelievers from sin, while discipline focuses on the liberation of fellow believers from sin. 11

The advantages of church discipline are that it preserves the purity of the church, and, with the help of the Lord, brings the offender to repentance.

**Conclusion**

When the Lord Jesus calls us to be His disciples, He calls us to a whole new way of living. As true disciples, we accept His atonement for our sin by faith. This is evidenced by our daily obedience to His Word.

In short, God established the church to affirm His disciples, to watch and direct His disciples, and to raise up more disciples.

Are we striving to grow in Christ and to help others do the same? May this be our goal as disciples of Christ.

Endnotes

1 Robert E. Picirilli, *DISCIPLESHIP: The Expression of Saving Faith* (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publication, 2013), 37.

2 Robert E. Picirilli, 1.

3 Robert E. Picirilli, 190.

4 Robert E. Picirilli, 192.

5 Robert E. Picirilli, 195.

6 Robert E. Picirilli, 189.

7 Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *THE DELIBERATE CHURCH: Building Your Ministry on the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 43.

8 R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *HE IS NOT SILENT: Preaching In A Postmodern World* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2008), 26.

9 Robert E. Picirilli, 195.

10 Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 264.

11 Jeffress, Robert, *“GRACE GONE WILD!: Getting A Grip On God’s Amazing Gift”* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2005), 176.