

CASE STUDY: ADOPTING A “RELATIONSHIP” GOSPEL

Don’t mess with success! Yet, three prominent pastors of megachurches (*Francis Chan*, Cornerstone Church in Simi Valley, California; *David Platt*, The Church at Brook Hill in Birmingham, Alabama; and *Kyle Idleman*, Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, Kentucky) came to similar “what-am-I-doing” moments. Although triggered by different situations, they each arrived at the identical conclusion—the American church is filled with attendees seeking to be entertained. In fact, each pastor acknowledged being part of creating an environment that fostered such an expectation.

Perceived Problem

Seeking “successful” ministries that were measured by the number of satisfied customers, many church leaders adopted a business-model approach to ministry. Using an appealing, yet misrepresented gospel message, a lot of those in the church think they are saved when, in fact, they are not.

Kyle Idleman

In his book, *not a fan*, Idleman’s concern was that numerous churches have become “fan factories,” consumer-oriented churches with appealing messages that attracted merely enthusiastic admirers of Jesus.¹ Becoming customer sensitive with an attractive message “undermines the invitation of Jesus” and “the result is often a church full of raving fans, but not many followers.”² After

ESCAPE

studying John 6 where people no longer followed Jesus because of what He taught, Idleman wrote, “[W]hat became clear to me: it wasn’t the size of the crowd Jesus cared about; it was their level of commitment.”³ He began his sermon the following Sunday after coming to that conclusion,

I told the crowd that I was wrong for being too concerned with what they would think and how many of them would come back. I think over the years my intentions were good; I wanted to make Jesus look attractive as possible so that people would come to find eternal life in him. I was offering the people Jesus...In the process I cheapened the gospel.⁴

David Platt

In *Radical*, Platt, “The youngest megachurch pastor in history,” stated, “From the first day I was immersed in strategies for making the church bigger and better.”⁵ Consequently he lamented,

I am part of a system that has created a whole host of means and methods, plans and strategies for doing church that requires little if any power from God...Clearly, it doesn’t require the power of God to draw a crowd in our culture.⁶

Platt became concerned about his consumer-oriented approach also after consulting John 6, understanding that “Jesus apparently wasn’t interested in marketing himself to the masses.”⁷ He then explained,

Soon I realized I was on a collision course with an American church culture where success is defined by bigger crowds, bigger budgets, and bigger buildings. I was now confronted with a startling reality: Jesus actually spurned the things that my church culture said were most important.⁸

Francis Chan

On the back cover of *Crazy Love*, Chan wrote,

The God of the universe...loves us with a radical, unconditional, self-sacrificing love. And what is our typical response? We go to church, sing songs, and try not to cuss. Whether you’ve verbalized it or not...we all know something’s wrong.⁹

Chan acknowledged that he and we all as part of the church are responsible for the current situation of the church and “that the church in many ways is not doing well.”¹⁰ His perception is that American Christianity had attracted

APPENDIX C

lukewarm, halfhearted Christians. He provided the following observation: “As I see it, a lukewarm Christian is an oxymoron; there’s no such thing. To put it plainly, churchgoers who are ‘lukewarm’ are not Christians. We will not see them in heaven.”¹¹

“Perceived Problem” Summary

From the perspective of all three pastors, the church has a major problem: churches are full of non-Christians who have only accepted Jesus, deciding to trust in Him to get fire insurance, but who have not responded to Jesus’ invitation to be committed followers. Platt put it this way: “Churches are filled with *supposed* Christians who seem content to have casual association with Christ while giving nominal adherence to Christianity.”¹²

Proposed Solution

As previously noted, each pastor contributed to the current situation in which they find themselves. Each came to embrace the adage, “if you expect little *of* a person, you should expect little *from* that person.” Having “gotten religion,” they now seek to rectify the perceived problem by turning to Christ’s calls to “follow Him” in discipleship as their new model, where “Jesus clearly lays out his expectations of his followers.”¹³

Kyle Idleman

Idleman wrote, “Many have made a decision to believe in Jesus without making a commitment to follow Jesus. The gospel allows for no such distinction...Jesus never offered such an option.”¹⁴ Having “separated the message of ‘believe’ from the message of ‘follow,’”¹⁵ many in the church are mere spectators, who only *know about Jesus*, and are not actual followers of Christ, those who *intimately know Him*.¹⁶

Transitioning from the consumer appeal to make a decision to believe in Christ to the invitation to make a commitment to follow Christ, Idleman quoted Luke 9:23, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me,” and elaborated,

It doesn’t seem like a very appealing advertisement for Christianity. Verses like that one can make it difficult to recruit new Christians. But the truth is that John 3:16 and Luke 9:23 have to go together in order for there to be an accurate understanding of the gospel’s invitation.

John 3:16 emphasizes *believing*.

Luke 9:23 focuses on *following*.

ESCAPE

Those two things must necessarily go together. There is no believing without following. There is no John 3:16 without Luke 9:23.¹⁷

Explaining further, “Our churches will continue to be full of fans until we break down the dichotomy between following and believing. Following is part of believing. To *truly* believe is to follow.”¹⁸ With a decision of a change-in-life commitment to follow Christ, a relationship with Christ is established,¹⁹ a relationship which involves knowing Christ intimately and being known by Him.²⁰ Idleman noted, “When the relationship [with Jesus] on the inside is right, the outside [obedience] will follow.”²¹ Again the distinction between fans and followers is explained. “Fans may try to follow Jesus out of their own strength, but followers are empowered by the Holy Spirit.”²² The intimate relationship of a follower with Christ requires being filled with the Spirit, Who produces obedience to Christ’s commands through the follower.²³ Followers of Christ manifest Christlikeness by means of the Spirit.

David Platt

The customary accepting-Jesus-gospel presentations, that seek the response of asking Jesus to come into your heart in order to obtain a ticket to heaven, are biblically inaccurate.²⁴ In that case, “The only thing that’s required of you is a one-time decision for Christ, and you don’t have to worry about his commands, his standards, or his glory after making that decision.”²⁵ On the contrary, referring to the requirements of discipleship, “[T]he gospel demands and enables us to turn from our sin, to take up our cross, to die to ourselves, and to follow Jesus.”²⁶ This enablement of course is by means of the Spirit’s power.²⁷ Rather than merely accepting Jesus, the only proper response is our “immediate and total surrender” to Him.²⁸ To wholeheartedly believe in Christ is to follow Him in sacrificial service.

Platt explained, “Superficial religion involves a counterfeit ‘Christian’ life that consists of nothing more than truths to believe and things to do, and it misses the essence of what it means to follow Jesus.”²⁹ That is why “the essence of conversion...is whether you or I will submit to his lordship,”³⁰ becoming radical followers of Christ. Radical living occurs in the context of a relationship with Christ. “When Jesus came...calling followers to himself... his primary purpose was to invite his disciples into a personal relationship.”³¹ This “relationship with Jesus requires total, superior, and exclusive devotion.”³²

Francis Chan

Chan lamented, “I question whether many American churchgoers are really in love with God because they are so hesitant to do anything for Him.”³³ Nevertheless,

APPENDIX C

God is calling you to a passionate love relationship with Himself. Because the answer to religious complacency isn't working harder at a list of do's and don'ts—it's falling in love with God. And once you encounter His love,...you will never be the same.³⁴

Coming into a love relationship with Christ requires a total commitment to follow Him in obedience, which is evidenced in actions.³⁵ "Jesus' call to commitment is clear: He wants all or nothing. The thought of a person calling himself a 'Christian' without being a devoted follower of Christ is absurd."³⁶ The reason: "When we truly love Christ, our work is a manifestation of that love."³⁷

"Proposed Solution" Summary

With very "successful" ministries, all of these megachurch pastors concluded that they had pursued the wrong goal. Sincerely wanting to make disciples, they had only attracted large, enthusiastic crowds. With a pendulum swing in ministry, they now required total commitment to follow Christ in discipleship as their litmus test for confirming one's love relationship with Jesus.

Embracing Biblical Error

In their quest for a solution to a problem of their own making, the three pastors have embraced a believe-follow or faith-works gospel, which cannot actually fix the fundamental concern. It in fact exacerbates the situation. Granted a faith-works gospel produces a pragmatic approach to living, leading to behavioral conformity, but most assuredly fear and guilt will emerge, resulting from constant self-introspection.

Historical Background

A historical background lends perspective. These talented and articulate pastors began their ministries in obedience to Christ's command to make disciples. After attracting thousands of attendees to their churches with an appealing message and an entertaining environment, each one began to evaluate the results. In frustration they realized they had attracted mostly spectators or, in Idleman's words, mere "fans" who showed little evidence of any commitment to Christ.

Returning to the Scriptures to study Jesus' ministry, each one came to the conclusion that Christ's invitation to "follow Him" in discipleship required total surrender and commitment. Rather than an appealing message, Christ call to discipleship was in stark contrast requiring, in Platt's words, a "radical" change

ESCAPE

in living. Consequently each one adopted a gospel message that included both believing in and following Christ: a faith-plus-works message—an invitation to enter into, in Chan’s words, a “loving” relationship with Jesus, which is manifested by the power of the Spirit through their lives.

Present Reality

While not doubting their previous and present sincerity, these pastors believed many if not most in their own churches were not saved. With their new emphasis on discipleship, many in their congregation will assuredly think, whether right or wrong, they are not saved due to the faith-works demand of a totally committed life. Even worse, those who now begin to attend these churches and are persuaded by an incorrect message are destined to eternity separated from God.

Fallacy of Embracing the Impossible

After all their words written about making disciples, isn’t it the case that most of the attendees in their congregations are not followers of Christ because they failed to make discipleship a priority? At least two of them realized from John 6 that Jesus was not focused on crowds. Rather His major concern was for those who would be totally committed to Him. This was the very reason Jesus spent an inordinate amount of time with the Twelve. If Jesus concentrated on just a few, why would these pastors think they could disciple thousands? The answer: It was impossible. Yet they keep on trying to make disciples and fail in the process, particularly now as they expound a faith-works gospel.

Discussed below are fallacies of the believe-follow message embraced by these three pastors.

Embracing a “Relationship” Gospel

“Believing in Christ” combined with “following after Christ” into a “relationship” gospel is nothing more than the renaming of the erroneous “faith-works” message. It is merging justification with sanctification in order to be saved. As discussed in chapter 13, the term *relationship* is the terminology used in the dating scene, but when used in the biblical setting it creates great confusion (see *Supplement A*).

“Believing in Christ for eternal life” is typically expressed to refer to “the establishment of a relationship with Christ.” While the term *relationship* is not a biblical term, it has historically been used in that manner to refer to being born again, relating to the conversion experience. Needless to say, when this term becomes an umbrella word inclusive of not only justification but also sanctification, salvation becomes the result of both faith and works.

APPENDIX C

Observing that the members of their congregations did not seem to evidence a close walk with God, each of these pastors concluded he hadn't presented the complete gospel, omitting Christ's call to follow Him in total surrender and commitment. The requirement is both (1) to believe in Christ and (2) to follow after Christ in an obedient walk. Anything less showed one to be a non-Christian. Consequently, their new *relationship gospel* ignores the free-gift aspect of the salvation but absolutely requires following Christ in the works of discipleship. Rejecting the "selling Jesus" method of ministry, all three pastors leaped from a wrong approach to embrace the wrong gospel message. Since they now are combining salvation through faith with sanctification by works, they hold a position more detrimental than before.

As a side note, it is obvious that the "relationship" gospel has become mainstream teaching. Not only have these three well-known pastors disseminated this view, but others as well. One author has particularly impacted the Church through his popular, New York Times best seller, *The Shack*. Nevertheless, it isn't Christ's desire for individuals to become His "buddy." Rather, He desires faithful obedience by those who follow after Him. Remember it should be understood that both *discipleship* and *fellowship* are *relational concepts* but they certainly aren't to be confused with the Christian's positional standing before God at the new birth.

SUPPLEMENT A RELATIONAL-CONNECTION CLARIFIED

Due to the emphasis on a "relationship" gospel, clarity regarding (1) the combination of words with the suffix *-ship* and (2) the theological use of the term *relationship* is warranted.

Combination of Words with the Suffix *-Ship*

Chart C-1 gives examples of words that are combined with the suffix *-ship*. In each case, a relational condition and connection is established. Notice the "finer distinctions" when nouns are used with the suffix *-ship*: skill (craftsmanship), position (professorship), rank (ladyship), and quantity (readership).³⁸ The remaining examples fall within the "status" category, as follows:

Relationship refers to a "state of being related" in reference to items, objects, people, etc. (e.g., subject-verb relationship, landlord-tenant relationship, love-hate relationship, and good-or-bad relationship).³⁹ Nevertheless, in the 1940's this term began to be used "specifically of romantic or sexual relationships."⁴⁰ Consequently, the current define-the-relationship (DTR)

ESCAPE

C-1

RELATIONAL CONNECTION Suffix *-Ship* Designates Connection

WORD COMBINATION	DISTINCTION	RELATIONAL CONNECTION	CONCEPT
Craftsman + ship	Skill	worker to ability	Craftsmanship
Professor + ship	Position	teacher to school	Professorship
Lady + ship	Rank	dignitary to title	Ladyship
Reader + ship	Quantity	readers to author	Readership
Relation + ship	Status	item to item	Relationship
Friend + ship	Status	friend to friend	Friendship
Court + ship	Status	male to female	Courtship
Fellow + ship	Status	believer to believer	Fellowship
Disciple + ship	Status	learner to teacher	Discipleship

emphasis in dating is an outgrowth of the way the term *relationship* has transitioned. Obviously, the meanings of words change over time. However, the concern of this author is that other Christian writers now associate the term *relationship* with the Christian walk (sanctification). Even though never found in the New Testament, *relationship* has historically been used by the Church in reference to the new birth (justification). Consequently, justification and sanctification are being combined under a “relationship umbrella,” defined as both establishing a relationship and then growing in that relationship with Christ.

Friendship and *courtship* have both fallen out of favor to describe a growing affection and intimacy between people due to the popularity of the term *relationship*.

Fellowship in the New Testament, along with discipleship, is a word used to address the growing affection and intimacy between believers as well as between God and believers (sanctification). The following texts illustrate that fellowship should be preferred over relationship in reference to the Christian life, regarding God and other believers.

APPENDIX C

3 [W]hat we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have *fellowship* with us; and indeed our *fellowship* is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ...6 If we say that we have *fellowship* with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; 7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have *fellowship* with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:3, 6-7, emphasis added).

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to *fellowship*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer (Acts 2:42, emphasis added).

Discipleship, likewise, is a word used in the New Testament to address the growing intimacy between Christ and committed followers (sanctification). A disciple is a learner or follower of a teacher, hoping to become just like him. Notice that "discipleship" and "followership" would be biblically synonymous terms. Like fellowship, discipleship rather than relationship should be the preferred term used for sanctification, as the following texts illustrate.

A *pupil* [learner] is not above his *teacher*; but everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his *teacher* (Luke 6:40, emphasis mine).

And He was saying to *them* all, "If anyone wishes to *come after Me*, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me (Luke 9:23, emphasis mine).

26 If anyone *comes to Me*, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My *disciple*. 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My *disciple* (Luke 14:26-27, emphasis added).

Theological Use of Relationship

How and why a term is used in theological discussions gives insight into the thrust of a person's theological position. Consider the following factors that surround the use of the term *relationship*.

ESCAPE

Customary Use of Relationship

The current, popular use of the term *relationship* describes the Christian walk. However, historically relationship has been used to indicate the union between a believer and God at salvation, which is exclusively a justification issue when the believer is declared righteous.

Improbable Use of Relationship

The use of relationship in conjunction with sanctification or the Christian walk is questionable since other biblical words are used in reference to sanctification as a growing acquaintance and intimacy with Christ: fellowship and discipleship. John emphasizes fellowship in 1 John 1:3-7, while Luke's emphasis in Luke 9:23-25 and 14:26-27 is discipleship. In turn, Paul's concern was for believers to "walk with respect to the Spirit" (Rom 8:4; Gal 5:16) and John's use of the term *abiding* (John 15) likewise address a Christian's communion with God (sanctification).

Predictable Use of Relationship

It is not surprising that those with certain theological traditions of salvation (e.g., Catholic's faith + works position or Reformed's faith, which includes works as proof of faith, position) would embrace the term *relationship* since it merges justification with sanctification. Such usage corresponds to their theological faith-works ideology.⁴¹

Theological Application Can Lead to Abuse and Confusion

Since the term *relationship* is *not* used in the New Testament, its use in theology must not contradict the content of Scripture. To do so is to error and to say what the Scriptures doesn't say — to teach what the Bible does not teach!

Rather than adopting the jargon of the day that mixes the historical meaning of relationship (justification) with fellowship (sanctification), we should default to using terms that will not confuse our readers or listeners. Maybe we should use union and communion, salvation and discipleship, or justification and sanctification. I will say that define-your-justification (DYJ) in Christ and define-your-sanctification (DYS) with Christ doesn't have the pizzazz as define-the-relationship (DTR). However, they definitely don't fuse justification with sanctification and produce a false message.

APPENDIX C

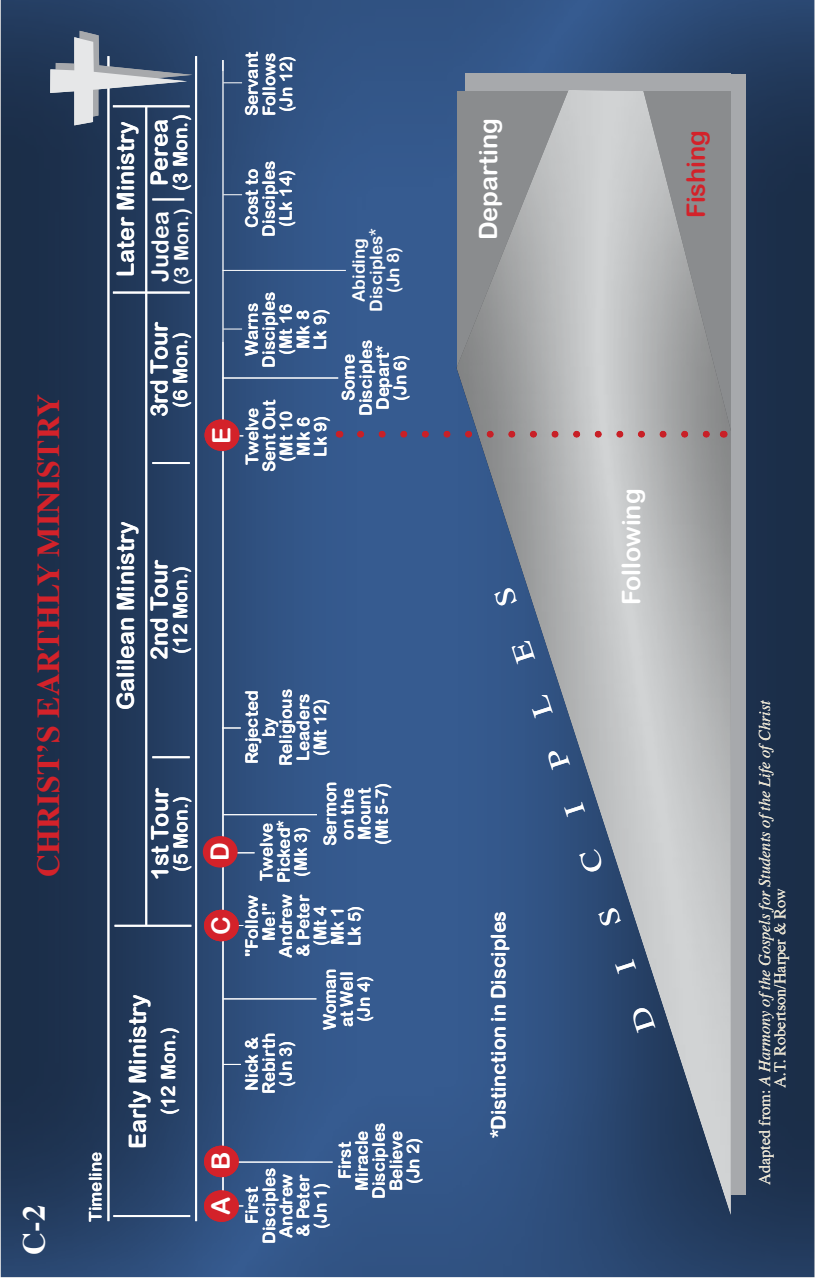
Blurring the Distinction between Relationship and Discipleship

The clear distinction between salvation and discipleship comes to light from the example of Christ's earthly ministry. The historical context is shown in the following diagrams. Chart C-2 shows selected events in the three-and-one-half-year ministry of Christ.⁴² His earthly ministry is typically divided into three main periods: Early ministry lasting approximately one year, Galilean ministry lasting approximately two years, and Later ministry lasting approximately one-half year. We will address the specific, selected events in the following charts. As depicted, followers or disciples of Jesus grew in number through the early years of His ministry (see gray area).

Notice particularly the events indicated with A to E. At the beginning, Andrew and Peter who were disciples of John the Baptist began to follow Christ (**A**, John 1:37) and two days later believed in Him as the Christ at His first miracle of changing water to wine (**B**, John 2:11). Months later at the beginning of His Galilean ministry, Jesus said to these very same men, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (**C**, Matt 4:19). At that time they left their boats and began to follow Him as committed disciples. They and the other ten disciples were selected by Jesus to be His intimate companions during the first preaching tour throughout Galilee (**D**, Mark 3:14). After His rejection by the religious leaders in Matthew 12, He then began to focus His attention on the preparation of these twelve men. He was preparing them for what would lie ahead after His return to the Father. Their on-the-job training readied them for being sent out to ministry late in the Galilean period (**E**, Luke 9:2). As shown, the Twelve began their fishing-for-men ministry during the last year of Christ's earthly ministry.

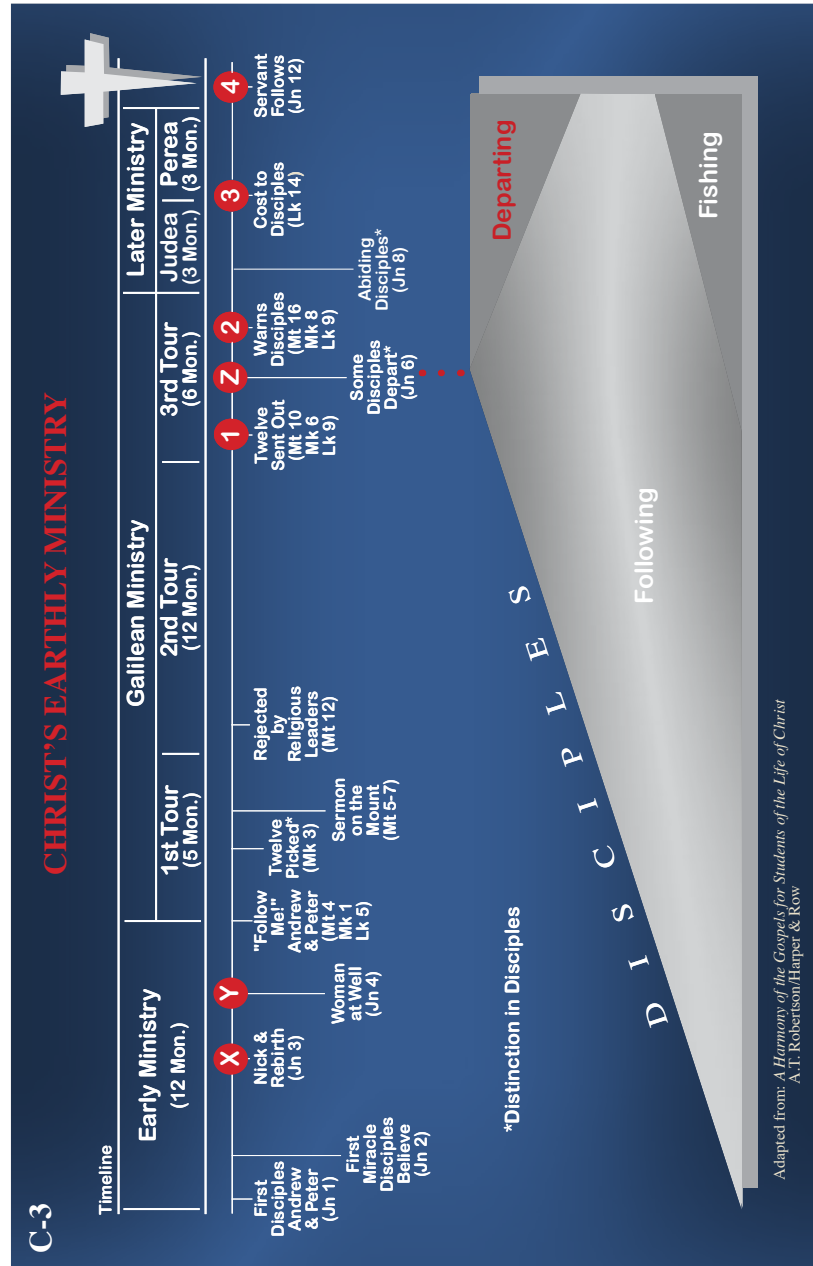
The numbers 1 through 4 on chart C-3 give the primary passages where Jesus taught on the subject of discipleship. As shown, all four occurred during the last year of Christ's earthly ministry. In these familiar discipleship texts Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow me" (**2**, Luke 9:23) and "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother...even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (**3**, Luke 14:26). This message was quite different from His past conversations with Nicodemus (**X**, John 3) and the woman at the well (**Y**, John 4). In those instances He did not mention the cost of following Him. There the attention was focused on believing in Him.

Changing the emphasis, His teachings became increasingly serious with demands for anyone who considered following Him in discipleship. In the bread-of-life lesson (**Z**, John 6) Jesus spoke of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, causing tension and doubt in some of His followers, with many deciding to leave. Why the change in approach? During the final year of His earthly ministry, Jesus' primary purpose was not to attract additional followers, but instead to invoke commitment from those who were already disciples.



ESCAPE

APPENDIX C



ESCAPE

Establishing a growing intimacy, allegiance, and dedication to Christ became the emphasis so that His committed followers would be part of establishing the infinite church when He was no longer here.

Chart C-4 illustrates a connection between significant events from the prior charts—indicated by A to C and then 1 to 4. Andrew and Peter were the first curious followers or disciples of Christ (A, John 1) and believed in Him at the first miracle (B, John 2), becoming convinced followers.⁴³ But months later when Jesus called Andrew and Peter, who were already believers, to enter into committed discipleship, He said, “Follow Me” (C, Matt 4). In a similar manner during the closing months of His earthly ministry, Christ spoke of the demands on those who would follow Him (1–4). His call each time was to “Follow Me.”⁴⁴ In every case, His call *never* referred to believing in Him; rather His appeal was a call to committed discipleship for those who were already Christians.

When *coming to Christ*, a relationship subject, is merged with *following after Christ*, a discipleship subject, the gospel message is not only distorted or blurred—it is false. Christ’s calls to “Follow Me” concerned discipleship, not salvation.

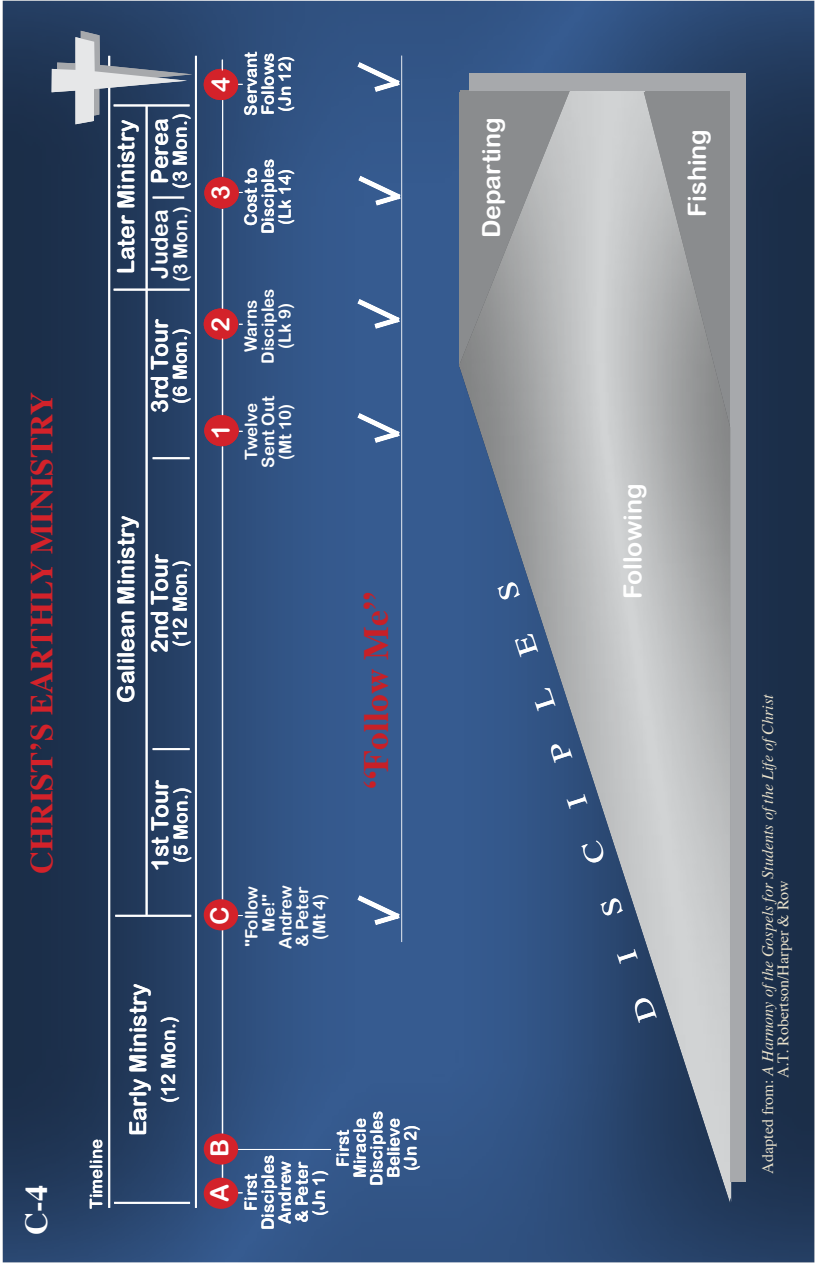
Blurring the Distinction between Disciples

These three prominent pastors have clouded the distinction between relationship, believing in Christ, and discipleship, following after Christ. They also have blurred the biblical differences between various types of disciples or followers of Christ. Unfortunately, they assume Christ’s call to “Follow Me” was an evangelistic message, a salvation appeal.

We must remember that the term *disciple* means a *follower or learner* who in New Testament times would associate themselves with a particular teacher. Consequently, the term can refer to a variety of followers: curious, convinced, and committed. In fact, disciples can refer to unbelievers. For example the Pharisees sent their own disciples to test Christ with a question (Matt 22:15-16). We have already indicated that Andrew and Peter who were disciples or followers of John the Baptist began to follow Christ (John 1:37) and later became believers in Christ (John 2:11). Obviously, the crowds following Jesus were interested in both what He taught and the miracles He performed (e.g., Mark 3:7-8). Those crowds include both believers and nonbelievers. Then there were the Twelve disciples, Christ’s close companions. All these were called disciples in the New Testament.

The New Testament tells us that there are distinct differences in the disciples that followed Jesus. Refer again to the timeline on chart C-2. Take note that when Jesus called Andrew and Peter to “Follow Him” (C, Matt 4:19), they had already been following (A, John 1:37) and were already believers

APPENDIX C



ESCAPE

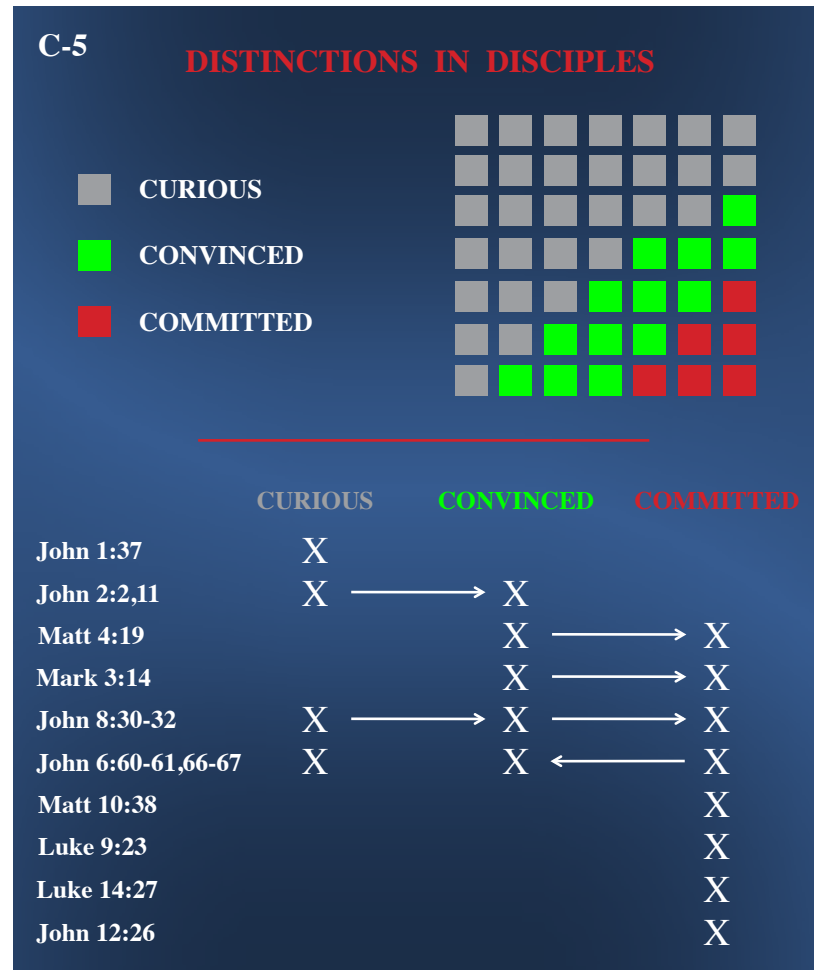
(**B**, John 2:11). They responded to Christ's call by leaving their boats and following Christ in a more intimate form of discipleship. As the timeline shows, Jesus selected the Twelve (**D**, Mark 3:14) from a group of "His disciples" (Mark 3:7), which differed from the "great multitude" that followed Christ. Notice Jesus "appointed twelve" from among those indicated as "His disciples"—"so that they would be with Him and that He *could* send them out to preach." When Christ sent out the Twelve (**E**, Mark 9:2), they were prepared to make Him known to the world resulting from their close, personal "with-Him" time of fellowship.

These texts show the possible progression in being a disciple of Christ, moving from the *curious* disciple, those who are unbelievers yet are interested in knowing more about Christ's teaching, to the *convinced* disciple, those who are persuaded and believe in Christ for eternal life, and finally to the *committed* disciples, those who desired to experience intimate fellowship with Christ.⁴⁵ Chart C-5 gives the visual perspective of these different types of disciples from the New Testament. The individual boxes graphically picture those who represent all of Christ's followers. While all disciples at some time have been curious disciples, only some come to faith in Christ and thus are convinced followers (indicated in green). Even a smaller group choose to "follow Christ" in intimacy and committed discipleship (indicated in red).

The bottom portion of chart C-5 sets forth example texts that support the three types of disciples. We just discussed the first four texts (John 1:27; 2:11; Matt 4:19; Mark 3:14). Leaving John 8 for the next section, John 6 (**Z**, on chart C-3) provides insight to Jesus' statement that He is the bread of life. Teaching the necessity of eating His flesh, "many" of His disciples were stunned (v 60). Notice that "some," evidently within the "many," were not believers or convinced disciples (v 64). As a result of Jesus' teaching, verse 66 indicates that "many" of His disciples withdrew and no longer followed Him. Would that mean that both unbelievers and also some believers departed and no longer followed Him from that point? Apparently it should be taken in that way, since Jesus immediately turned to the Twelve in verse 67 and inquired, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" At least that was the choice He set before the Twelve. [Note: the backwards arrow indicates the potential movement for committed disciples back toward being only convinced disciples.] The remaining four texts, 1–4 on both chart C-3 and C-4, relate to Christ's teaching on discipleship and its demands.

Some understand that "the *call to Calvary* must be recognized for what it is a *call to discipleship* under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To respond to that call is to become a believer."⁴⁶ In contrast, Jesus' call to "Follow Me" in discipleship had absolutely nothing to do with becoming a believer in Christ. Rather, His call to "Follow Me" was to commitment by convinced believers for close, personal fellowship and obedience.

APPENDIX C



Misunderstanding the Disciple-Making Process

At salvation, a relationship is established through faith in Jesus, opening the door for the Christian to begin to grow in maturity by obeying the commands in the New Testament. Matthew 28:19-20 addressed this process when Jesus instructed the Eleven at the end of His earthly ministry to “make disciples.”

Having observed Jesus for three-and-a-half years, the apostles must have

ESCAPE

certainly known that disciple-making involved a process in which men move from being merely “curious” followers, to actually becoming “convinced,” and finally “committed.”⁴⁷ The total sequence is captured in Matthew 28:19-20, “Go and make disciples (followers)...baptizing them...and...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” The Eleven had personally experienced moving from being curious (John 1:35-40), to convinced (2:11), to committed (Matt 4:18-20). They were keenly aware that the prerequisite to making followers of Christ was “going” to connect and interact with individuals who may or may not be favorable to the saving message. Consequently, “go” required that they “initiate” connections with people⁴⁸ and make known to the curious that eternal life was through faith in Christ. [Note: “Go” demands the intentional establishment of personal connections, no matter the location.] The apostles had observed inquisitive followers who came to see Jesus’ miracles and hear His words, some of whom were persuaded and were baptized. In the first century baptism was the first act of obedience after salvation, but that was only the beginning step in discipleship. Notice that “teaching them” is a continuing process — so that they “observe [obey] all that [Jesus] commanded.” The Eleven remembered how it took time for them and it likewise requires time for anyone in order for Christ’s teachings to transform the convinced follower into a committed disciple.

Supplement B **Matthew 28:19 Translation**

Understanding “go and make disciples” in Matthew 28 as two commands is the valid translation based on the grammatical structure of the text.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the book of Acts provides needed insight. Approximately two years after Christ’s death, a fact on which most scholars agree, the events in Acts 8:1 actually took place.⁵⁰ “And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Notice that “all” left except the apostles. The timeframe regarding this verse in relation to the Matthew passage presents us with a dilemma relating to the usual view of “go and make disciples.” There are two possible scenarios: first, the apostles were disobedient for two years, remaining in Jerusalem, and did not “go” as Christ commanded or, second, they had a different understanding of His words and today we misapply the text. The historical background supports an alternative way of looking at the text and in fact provides a new and fresh perspective regarding disciple-making.

APPENDIX C

With the historical context in mind, the Great Commission concerns all Christians, no matter where they are, rather than the customarily and exclusive missionary “go” emphasis that focuses on the distinction between the “goers” and the “senders.” All believers are to “go” in their daily lives, in their workplaces, in their neighborhoods, and in their schools. All believers are to be involved in the process of “making disciples,” from curious, to convinced, and to committed followers of Jesus Christ.

As previously addressed in chapter 1, Jesus discussed the progression in the disciple-making process:

While in Judea during the last six-month period of His earthly ministry, Jesus presents His light-of-the-world teaching. John 8:30 states that “As He spoke these things, many came to believe in Him.” The next verse states that He then spoke “to those Jews who had believed Him” (v 31). With not a hint of a time lag, immediately He continues to speak in verses 31 and 32 to those who had just believed. He said, “If you continue [abide] in My word, *then* you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” Jesus gives a condition with a promise. The condition is to abide in His word. Since a condition may or may not be kept, the promise of being a *true* disciple is only assured if one abides in Christ’s teachings. On the other hand, if a believer does not abide in Christ’s teachings, that one remains a believer and a disciple, but he is not a truly, abiding disciple. That one will *not come to know* the truth of Christ’s teachings, which would make him truly free.

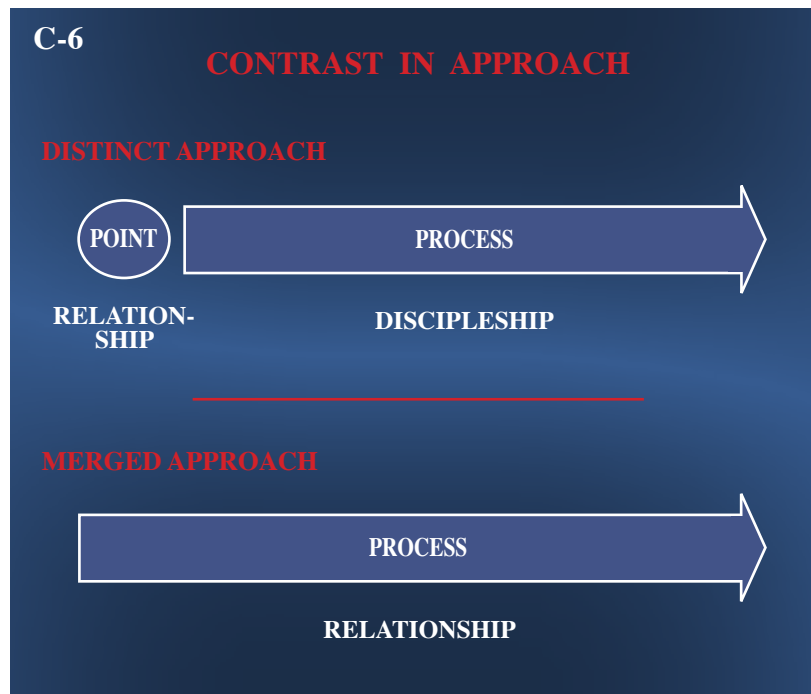
Notice the progression in John 8:30-32. Out of a large group of followers, including curious nonbelievers, the text tells us “many came to believe in Him.” A relationship between those who believed and God was established. They had become convinced that Christ is indeed the light of the world. To these convinced followers, “who had believed Him,” Jesus appeals to them to abide in His word. If these convinced followers would abide in His teachings, it would reveal their devotion to Him and they would be known as true disciples—committed followers. These curious followers had become convinced followers, and if they abide in Christ’s teachings, they could become increasingly committed. Is this not the concept Jesus taught in Matthew 28:20, “*teaching them* [convinced disciples] *to observe* [obey] *all that I have commanded you?*” Convinced disciples are to grow in commitment to Christ. However, they must abide in His

ESCAPE

teaching to know and then to obey, thereby giving evidence that they are committed disciples.

Both Matthew 28 and John 8 present a different approach than to those who proclaim a “relationship” gospel. Chart C-6 graphically shows the contrast between the approach that makes a distinction between relationship and discipleship as in Matthew 28 and John 8 and the approach that includes discipleship under an ongoing relationship idea. The first understands “coming to faith” at salvation to establish a relationship with Christ, while discipleship is a lifelong process of growing obedience to His commands resulting in Christian maturity. On the other hand, commingling discipleship under a relationship umbrella confuses the two terms. The *distinct approach* separates faith from works for salvation, while the *merged approach* combines faith and works for salvation. The latter approach is biblical incorrect.

Please Note: The *call to discipleship* is an appeal for those who are already convinced Christians to commitment in life and service to Christ. The *command to make disciples* is the responsibility of all believers involving not



APPENDIX C

only evangelistic outreach through word and deed but also teaching those who become believers to follow Christ. Notice that disciple-making encompasses both a *call* for non-believers *to come* to Christ and a *call* for believers *to follow* after Christ in obedience. The distortion takes place when the call to come to Christ is intertwined with the call to follow Him. Biblically, coming to Christ must first happen in order that following after Christ is a possibility. At the new birth, God gives spiritual life to those who were spiritually dead. Life that is abundant becomes a reality in daily experience if we are obedient followers of Christ.

Echo from the Past

A change in ministry perspective based on a change in gospel content is not a new idea. John MacArthur addressed this issue decades earlier in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*. While these present authors promote *relationship salvation*, MacArthur encouraged his readers to embrace *lordship salvation*.

After several years of study, MacArthur became convinced that the gospel in vogue at that time misrepresented the biblical gospel message.⁵¹ He wrote,

It promises [sinners] they can have eternal life yet continue to live in rebellion against God. Indeed, it *encourages* people to claim Jesus as Savior yet defer until later the commitment to obey Him as Lord.⁵²

As a result MacArthur observed, “The character of the visible church reveals the detestable consequence.”⁵³

Just as the current authors above have done, MacArthur’s “study of the gospels”⁵⁴ confirmed for him “the *gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a call to follow Him* in submissive obedience.”⁵⁵ Salvation then requires a person both to accept Jesus as Savior and to yield in obedience to Him as Lord.⁵⁶ He concluded, “Thus there is no salvation except ‘lordship’ salvation,”⁵⁷ since here is no “distinction between salvation and discipleship,” between justification and sanctification.⁵⁸

Whether it is called *relationship salvation* or *lordship salvation*, the end result is the same. It is the mixing of justification and sanctification, of relationship and discipleship. Salvation then rests on faith and works. *But, that certainly isn’t the biblical gospel.*

