Colossians 1:28-29 *Disciples Who Make Disciples: Disciples, not Consumers*

***The Dark Side of Church Growth***In the 1980s and 90s something known as the “Church Growth” movement held sway in American Christianity. Utilizing things learned from the fields of sociology, marketing, and entertainment, the Church Growth movement stressed finding points of connection with people who were disconnected from Church.

It was through the Church Growth Movement that words like “contemporary” and “relevant” came into the church. It was through the Church Growth Movement that some of the largest and most influential churches in America got their start, churches like Willow Creek in Chicagoland and Saddleback in Southern California.

The Church Growth Movement did a lot of good things: it helped to make the gospel meaningful to generations of people who saw it as a relic of the past; it helped Christians to remember that the church exists more for those who do not attend then it does for those who do; and it re-energized a large number of congregations to love and serve the Lord.

I studied to be a pastor in the mid 1990s when the church growth movement was arguably at its peak. Like I said, all the well-known churches were using church growth principles and everyone wanted to learn from them. I am heavily influenced by the movement and many of the things we do here at Hope Church are reflective of that.

And, like I said, I think that is a good thing. It is vital that we do church in a way that is attractive to people who do not come here yet. I think it is important that our music, our children and youth programs, and our sermons communicate to people in a way that they can understand and relate to. I think that churches are a lot like sharks: if they don’t keep moving, they will die.

But the Church Growth Movement also had some unintended consequences. As good as it was at attracting people to attend church, it tended to encourage them to think more like consumers than disciples.

It makes sense, and it is a peculiarly American thing. We are a consumer culture. We shop and compare and vote with our dollars. An author named Richard Halverson writes,

“When the Greeks got the gospel they turned it into a philosophy, when the Romans got it they turned it into a government, when the Europeans got it they turned it into a culture; when the Americans got it they turned it into an enterprise." Quoted by Ed Stetzer, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/october/whats-deal-w-church-growth-movement-part-2-some.html>

By borrowing from the world of business and attempting to get the attention of people who have so many options, churches begin to look like “religious service providers.” People come to the church looking to have their “religious” needs met in a way that is uplifting, inspiring, and intellectually stimulating. We look for programming that will engage our kids, worship music that is catchy and fun to sing, and messages that will challenge us without putting us to sleep. And the danger is that people show up at church only as long as things are being done for them and they get something out of it. We begin to pick and choose the religious goods and services that satisfy our wants.

In a blog post, William Willimon quotes a Lutheran pastor named Michael Foss who draws the comparison between a church and a health club. Foss writes:

I don’t want to push the analogy too far, but for the sake of illustration, let’s think of the membership model of church as similar to the membership model of the modern health club. One becomes a member of a health club by paying dues (in a church, the monthly or weekly offering). Having paid their dues, the members expect the services of the club to be at their disposal. Exercise equipment, weight room, aerobics classes, an indoor track, swimming pool—all there for them, with a trained staff to see that they benefit by them. Members may bring a guest on occasion, but only those who pay their dues have a right to the use of the facilities and the attention of the staff. There is no need to belabor the point. Many who sit in the pews on Sundays have come to think of church membership in ways analogous to how the fitness crowd views membership in a health club.

Willimon then goes on to write:

… this understanding has misplaced the true purpose of the church and distorted its nature. The point is not membership. The church does not have clients, members, or consumers of goods and services. The point is discipleship. The church exists to form and sustain individuals and a people who are followers of Jesus Christ, who are his disciples. Rather than buying into a consumer model of the church, where the customer is king and the church simply meets customers’ needs, the church does more; the church redefines our true needs. The church transforms people according to the life and pattern revealed by God in Jesus Christ. It unites them with others who are committed to this way of life. <http://willimon.blogspot.com/2009/09/christians-as-consumers-or-disciples.html>

This realization that the church growth movement has not necessarily created growing disciples has gotten the attention of a lot of pastors. Several years ago Willow Creek released the results of a massive survey they did among their own people that revealed they were good at drawing a crowd but that those who attended Willow were not developing a relationship with Jesus as much as had been hoped. In recent years they have put an increased emphasis on discipleship.

Likewise, at Hope Church we are talking about discipleship. We are in the midst of a sermon series in which we are setting an emphasis for the coming year. Our vision is that we will be a church full of disciples who make disciples. More than just consumers of religious goods and services, our hope is that Hope Church will be filled with people who are growing in their relationship with Jesus and also that we will be a community where we are taking responsibility to prepare one another for glory.

And what I want to do today is talk about some of the challenges that come from putting an emphasis on discipleship. I want us to think about some of the pitfalls that can come from a discipleship emphasis, things that can pull us right back into a consumer mentality, and try to get our heads straight about what Jesus is calling us to.

So, I have three things that Discipleship is not, along with a better way to think about it. And for each point, we’ll go to scripture for an illustration.

***Not a Program***So, first, **discipleship is not a program.** Discipleship is not a curriculum or a set of books or a class that you can sign up for and complete in order to be considered a disciple.

One of our problems is that we want a course of study that we can enroll in and then receive a certificate of completion for. This is part of our consumer mentality, like signing up for an online course in order to be an expert on wine or something; we want to know “what are the core requirements for being a disciple?”

And, of course, the temptation for the church is to create programs that people can participate in. Like a money management program or a parenting program we’d love to have a program that we’d put you in and say here’s how you become a disciple.

In fact, and here’s the challenge of making discipleship an emphasis at our church, we are going to develop some programs that we hope will encourage you to grow as a disciple. I’m going to talk about one in a little bit. There are classes that you can take and books that you can read that will help deepen your walk with Jesus. There is some basic knowledge about the Bible you should have and certain Christian disciplines you should acquire that will increase your commitment to Him.

But we must not make the mistake of substituting a program for discipleship. We must not think that because we have completed some course of study that we have been discipled. I spent three years as a full-time seminary student, but that doesn’t mean that I am done with discipleship. Programs can provide good information and skills, but they’re just tools of the growth process, not discipleship itself.

Instead of thinking of discipleship as a program, we need to see it as **a way of life**. When Jesus called Andrew and Peter and James and John to become fishers of men; He wasn’t inviting them to sit in on a seminar, He was calling them to commit their whole lives to following Him.

As an example of this, I think of the story of the rich young ruler. His story shows up in three of the four gospels, even though we don’t know his name or all that much about him. But I think of him as an example of someone who wanted to reduce discipleship to a program. **Here’s what the gospel of Mark says about him:**

**17**As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

The man is looking for a shortcut. The emphasis should be on the word “do” in his question. He’s looking for something he can buy, a course of study he can enroll in, or a pattern that he can keep that will lead to eternal life. In other words: he’s looking for a program, something that he can check off a list that will ensure that he is on the right side of heaven.

And initially, Jesus answers his question in the terms he is asking for. He refers the man back to the commandments: “Do no murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not lie, honor your father and mother.” If you want a program, Jesus seems to be saying, keeping God’s law is a good place to start.

And this young man, who appears to be a doer, claims that he has kept all these commands since childhood.

You can almost hear his excitement. If this is the way to eternity, then he’s already got a leg up.

But then Jesus bursts his bubble. **Mark 10, verse 20:**

**21**Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

We often get caught up in the financial implications of this verse. Mark tells us that the man goes away despondent, because he has great wealth. Jesus says that it is very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. And we wonder if that means that Jesus wants us to give away everything and live as paupers.

But what I hear Jesus saying is that following Him is a lifestyle. It’s a way of life, in which every aspect of your life is influenced by Him. And so, if a disciple of Jesus has money, that money is available for Jesus to use. The point is not to give everything away and somehow buy your way into heaven—if that were the case, then the young man would have the program he was looking for, eternal life would be nothing more than a financial transaction—the point is to follow Jesus with all of your life. The point is to be a disciple.

So as we talk about discipleship here at Hope, and even as we offer programs to help you grow in discipleship, keep in mind that it is not something that can be reduced to a program. It is a way of life characterized by a decision to follow Jesus, an openness to be changed by him, and an availability to serve him.

***Not a Limited Time***Second, **discipleship is not for a limited time.** Sometimes when we hear the word discipleship, we assume that it is something for someone who has just become a Christian.

Our kids and our youth need to be discipled. Someone who has been outside of the church but comes to know Jesus, they need to enter a discipleship program. But if I’ve been walking with Jesus for a long time, if I’ve been going to church my whole life, then discipleship is for somebody else, not for me.

There is a temptation to think that we have reached a point where we have grown enough in our faith, that there is nothing more to teach us, that our catechism training or confirmation class provided us with all the basics we need for the Christian life.

But that’s not true. To be a Christian is to be a disciple, and to be a disciple implies continued growth. It’s not optional, or just for those who are the spiritual elite. **Discipleship is for our whole life.**

The Bible story that comes to mind to illustrate this idea is the story of Caleb.

Caleb is first introduced to us in Numbers 13. That’s the story of the Israelites and Moses coming to the border of the promised land for the first time. Moses appointed 12 spies, one from each tribe of Israel, to go into the promised land and scout it out. Caleb represented the tribe of Judah.

As it turns out, they found a land, as they said, “flowing with milk and honey.” (Num.13:27) They cut down a branch bearing a single cluster of grapes, and it took two men to carry it back to the camp (Num. 13:23). It was the land they had dreamed of for so long. The perfect reward after centuries of slavery in Egypt.

But there were already people living in the land, and they appeared to be giants. And so, when the spies reported back to Moses and the people, they bragged about the abundant fruit, but they also warned against the people. 10 of the 12 spies expressed their fear of attacking, saying that they felt like grasshoppers before the residents of Canaan. Only Joshua and Caleb argued that they should go and take the land the Lord had promised them.

As a result of the fearful report of the 10, the people rebelled against Moses and God. In judgment, God decreed that the entire generation would have to die before they entered the promised land. For the next 40 years the Israelites would wander in the desert. Only Joshua and Caleb, because of their courage, would survive to see their inheritance.

And so, one of my favorite anecdotes in the Bible comes from the book of Joshua, after the conquest, when it is time for Caleb to claim his land. **Joshua 14:10-12.** This is Caleb talking:

**10**“Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the wilderness. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! **11**I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. **12**Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”

What I love about this story is that Caleb is old—he says so himself—but there is no quit in him. He’s just as eager to go and conquer the Canaanites as he was on the day Moses sent him to spy on the land. I almost picture him throwing the blanket off his lap and getting up out of his wheelchair and saying: “Let me at ‘em!”

And I point to that story now as an illustration of the idea that there is no retirement from the Christian life. There is no point where we say we are done with the life of discipleship. Instead, like Caleb, we should continue to be eager to learn more about the Lord, to do more for the Lord, to grow deeper in our relationship with Him.

There’s a song I remember singing in Sunday School that was based on the parable Jesus told about 10 virgins. It went:

Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning burning burning  
 Give me oil in my lamp I pray  
 Give me oil in my lamp keep me burning burning burning  
 Keep me burning til the break of day.

(We really liked singing that song because we had a couple of extra verses. We would sing “give me gas in my Ford keep me trucking for the Lord” and “give me wax on my board keep me surfing for the Lord.” It was fun like that that kept me coming back every Sunday!)

I think that should be our prayer, too. That the Lord would keep us burning for Him. That we would see discipleship as a lifelong process. That we would continue to grow and develop our relationship with Jesus, right up to the day He calls us home.

***The Whole Point***Then, third, **discipleship is not just one of the things the church does.**

It is a mistake to section discipleship off as one aspect of the church’s ministry; as though someone could say: “I was a part of the discipleship ministry last year, but this year I am going to be a part of the worship ministry.” We cannot include discipleship on a menu of options offered by the church. Again, that fits the consumer mindset.

Instead, we have to see discipleship as **what the church does.** Everything we do in the church, every part of being a part of a Christian, is part of discipleship.

Here, now, I can finally get to the verse that I listed in the bulletin as our text for this week. **Colossians 1:28-29:**

**28**He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. **29**To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

The phrase that stands out to me in this passage, the reason I originally planned it to be my text for this sermon, is the end of verse 28: “that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.” That’s the discipleship part of this verse. That phrase describes the goal of discipleship: maturity in Christ.

Actually, let me back up a little bit. The word that is translated as “fully mature” is actually a very technical word in Greek. It’s the word “teleios”, and it’s a word that is used to describe the end of things. It’s a word that would describe someone who has reached the highest skill level in their profession, a word that would describe someone who had completed a course of study. Some English translations use the word “perfect” here.

So what the Apostle Paul is saying is that his goal is for everyone to reach the stage of perfectly following Christ. But since that is something that will not happen until we are taken by our Lord to heaven, there is an understanding that this is a goal that is never fully accomplished in this life. That is to say, full maturity is something we are always striving for. Perfection in Christ is an ongoing pursuit throughout this life.

And so, as I’ve been saying, it’s not a program that can be graduated from. It’s not something we ever grow out of. It is an ongoing pursuit.

But the reason we are looking at these verses now is because Paul says that this goal, this pursuit of maturity, this Christian discipleship, is the point of everything Paul does. All of the teaching and admonishing that he does, all of the proclaiming, is for this very reason: “to present everyone fully mature in Christ.” And then, in case we missed it, he says essentially the same thing in verse 29: “to this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.” This is the goal, this is the point.

And what I’m saying is that this needs to be the point of the church as well. This is our reason for being. It’s not to see how many people we can get here on a Sunday. It’s not to see how many people we can get to participate in a program. It’s not to see how many new songs we can learn or how many books we can read or anything like that. It’s to present everyone fully mature—or as mature as possible—in Christ. The reason the church exists is to make disciples. To help people grow in their relationship with Jesus.

It’s not just one of the things the church does. It’s what the church does.

***The Program***So, with all of that, let’s talk about how we are going to put an emphasis on discipleship. Having clarified that discipleship is not simply a program, let’s talk about the program we are going to implement to help us grow as disciples.

About a year ago, a small group of people here at Hope were invited to join other churches in the area for something called a “Discipleship Learning Community.” We get together with these other churches once a quarter, and we’ve also been meeting separately. And as we talked about discipleship here at Hope Church one of the things that we identified as being very effective in our church was the mentoring program that pairs adults with members of the youth group. So we started talking about what it might look like if we expanded that beyond the youth to the whole church.

In other words, the way we imagine increasing our culture of discipleship is by having folks enter into one-on-one mentoring relationships, so we can be disciples who make disciples. We imagine men partnered with men and women partnered with women to meet on a regular basis and have spiritually meaningful discussions. To talk about what it means to follow Jesus and learn from each other.

And so, we are going to have a couple of suppers at the end of this month—one for men and one for women. **We are calling the one for men Ironman**, based on Proverbs 27:17 which says: “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” That will be Thursday, September 28. And we **are calling the one for women Refined,** based on Zechariah 13:9, where God says: “I will refine them like silver, and test them like gold.” We’re going to have a speaker, a man named Rob Loane, out of Sioux Falls, who has coauthored a book on mentoring. And we are going lay out the vision for this mentoring and give you the chance to sign on. All the adult men and women are invited to these meals and I hope a lot of you will be able to come. You can sign up at the info table. By coming to the meal you are not committing to anything further, but it will be a chance to learn more.

So, that’s where we are going. That’s our challenge. To be more than just consumers of religious goods and services. But to be active disciples as a way of life.