

# Discipleship in a Post-Covid World

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A couple months ago, I wrote an article explaining how the Christian tradition is a castle and not a cabin. My point was that, in the face of the threat of secularism and anti-Christian sentiments that have arisen, we as believers shouldn't feel like we don't have sure footing to stand on intellectually. The idea came to me in part because of a book Justin Brierley recently wrote called *The Surprising Rebirth of Belief in God*. His book focuses on atheists, agnostics, and other prominent skeptics who have surrendered, if not to Christ and Christianity, then at least to belief in God.

If you rewind the clock a couple of decades ago, the movement of New Atheism seemed like it might overwhelm Christianity, but one of Justin's points is that that wave of atheism has crested, and building off his work, I wanted to remind Christians that we never have to wonder whether or not our faith is intellectually robust. The Christian tradition is not some leaky cabin to be ashamed of. No, it is a magnificent castle with numerous rooms to explore, intellectually. Secularism often borrows from the rich tradition of Christianity in making its claims about the world.

But while that article was mainly about the strength and truth of the Christian faith when it comes to dealing with the challenges of our contemporary culture, I was also reminded of another way that the Christian church is like a castle. She is a castle because she's weathered her share of storms through the centuries and stood the test of time.

One of the reasons we're here at this conference together is because we feel like we're in the middle of a storm right now. And it's true. This is such a strange moment in ministry we are experiencing these days. When I talk to pastors and church leaders around the country, I hear them share unique challenges they have never faced before and never would have expected to encounter just a few short years ago. The word "unprecedented" has been overused, but there is something about the challenges of our contemporary moment that make ministry more complicated than in decades past. Still, we cannot allow these new challenges to

sink our efforts to share the gospel and make disciples. And like the church in ages past, we can trust in the God who has established His church and ask for His help in fortifying the walls of this castle we've inherited.

What does this look like? A part of the solution to securing the future of discipleship is remembering and reestablishing the local church as an institution that exists for our church members and for our communities. To recover discipleship in a post-Covid world, the church needs to regain a vision of what it means to be a strong institution. Along those lines, first, we need to look at the challenges staring at us.

### **Challenge 1: Anti-Institutional Ethos**

First, there's an anti-institutional bent for many in our society today. Research indicates that many institutions, not just the church, are facing fallout in terms of institutional trust. The bad news is that trust in the church as an institution has, according to Gallup, plummeted by [more than 30 percentage points](#) in the last 50 years, but there's good news! Trust in almost every other institution has also plummeted! So, the church is not an outlier, but it does create challenges for ministry because pastoral leadership today doesn't come with any sort of prestige. There's no built-in sense of trust. Everything must be earned; nothing can be assumed.

In an individualistic world, we tend to think of freedom as the escape of institutional constraints, rather than the need to be formed and molded by those who have gone before us, or the community in which we are present. We've moved into a situation that cultural observer Tara Isabella Burton describes as a shift from *institutional* religion to *intuition* religion, where it's less about what church you belong to and more about remixing and rematching—cobbling together whatever version of spirituality helps you along in life. It's an intuition approach set against a more historically institutional way of looking at the church.

### **Challenge 2: The De-Churching of America**

Another is the shift in “dechurching.” A new book by some friends of mine, *The Great De-churching* explores how America is undergoing the largest shift in religiosity in our history.

Since 2000, we have seen a radical decrease of people regularly attending or belonging to a church congregation. Of course, there's also the pandemic, which led to a decrease in programs and ministries as we shifted to this "new normal" within our post-pandemic world.

### **Challenge 3: Disorientation and Division Politically**

We've also experienced disorientation politically and socially [as partisan hostility has increased over the last two decades](#). My suspicion is that, as religiosity has decreased, political drama has stepped in to fill the void. Politics is a pseudo-religion for some. New divisions arise. And here, rather than a "thou shalt" or a "thou shalt not" from the Scriptures, we find ourselves in the realm of wisdom and discernment, but people are inclined to cancel those who don't adhere to precisely the same views as themselves. We're seeing allegedly secular people practically issuing calls to "burn the heretic!"

Here's what pastors are facing. They are saying the same things they have said for years now, but they are being heard differently because of the way cultural lines have been drawn and redrawn. You can talk about racial reconciliation and racial justice the same way you did ten years ago. But people will now call you "woke." Or you can stand for religious liberty and the traditional view of marriage, and some will call you a bigot.

### **What Hasn't Changed**

So, yes, it is a strange time to be in ministry, and we've no doubt felt the weight of many of these shifts. But we should also ask: What hasn't changed?

What hasn't changed is our responsibility of making disciples who make disciples—the **Great Commission**. Jesus said that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him and that we are to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them all He has commanded. This is our task, and it hasn't changed. For 2,000 years, it hasn't changed. No matter what cultural shifts may come; no matter what cultural winds may blow, making disciples remains our task.

What also hasn't changed is **God's love and purpose for the church**, the one entity that endures and transcends circumstances. *How* we make disciples may shift, but our call to make disciples does not. If we truly believe Jesus when He says He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it, then we must consider our role within His plan of redemption.

### ***Busting Some Myths***

I hear different accounts from pastors around the country about what they're experiencing post-Covid. Some have the impression that Covid radically sped up the trend of de-churching. They assume there was a steady decline until the spring of 2020 and then a drop-off happened, which we haven't been able to come back from. I know of a lot of churches that have not seen their numbers rebound to what they were before Covid. Maybe many of you in this room can relate.

Another impression people have is that online worship is taking over gathering with believers in person. One of the beautiful things about technology was that during the pandemic, we were able to continue our worship services, seeing our pastors and our worship leaders, maybe Zooming with our small groups. Any time in human history up until this point, during epidemics, a digital option would have been impossible. The downside to this, however, was that it may have generated the perception that church is merely content—messages and music—instead of a real-life community. If you can download the content by either watching the worship service live or listening to the sermon on a podcast or connecting with people on an app, you might count this as a substitute for in-person church gatherings.

I need to bust a couple of myths here, though. The data doesn't align with these experiences. Covid did not accelerate the de-churching of America, not in any statistically significant way. There was a bit of a bigger drop there, but not the extent of what many pastors expected. Instead, there is the continual trajectory of decline. There's no cliff, but many are pointing to Covid as if it were a cliff because of anecdotal evidence. Anecdotal evidence is just that—anecdotal—and it's largely the sign of two things.

## **Migration among Churches**

When pastors tell me that churches have not rebounded as before, their impressions point to a different phenomenon. First, there's been migration. Many Christians have migrated to other churches, so some churches are stable in their attendance or have actually grown (you see this among many larger churches), while others declined.

As people were watching online worship services over time, it was like a "fruit basket turnover," if you're familiar with that phrase, where church members migrate from one congregation to another, enjoying for a season the preaching and music here, sometimes coming back to their go-to congregation when they're in the mood for something more familiar, or heading over to a third church for a mission trip. It was an opportunity for everyone to stay home and ask some different questions. *Did they want to watch their own congregation's livestream, or might they attend church virtually through someone else's livestream?* The churches with more dynamic, engaging preaching; those that had an exceptionally streamed worship service, those churches picked up people who were already on the edges of the congregations they belonged to before. So, your most committed core church members stuck with the church through thick and thin during Covid. But many church members who were a bit on the periphery and who maybe weren't as connected as they appeared to be didn't feel a sense of community or loyalty or connectedness to that congregation. They were more likely to find a different faith community to belong to. This shift led some churches to grow or to remain stable while other churches declined.

So, part of what you're feeling may be migration. But don't accept that as a judgment on your congregation. Please don't hear me saying, "Well, if you lost members through Covid, it's because you weren't being faithful or your preaching wasn't as good." The reality is that we live in a consumeristic society whether we like it or not, and in the pandemic, everyone's church patterns and habits of attending were put on pause with an opportunity to shift to another congregation.

## **Decreasing Frequency**

Another reason it doesn't feel like church has rebounded is because Christians still consider themselves faithful churchgoers even when they attend less frequently than before. As Christians are responding to surveys, we're finding a discrepancy in the data. Many pastors say their numbers are not where they were before Covid. Part of that shift is due to migration, but in other cases, it's not migration. Maybe they didn't lose many church attendees at all. It's just that people in their congregations don't attend as often, yet still check on the survey that they are church attenders.

For example, someone who would consider themselves to be a faithful churchgoer who was there three times a week may now consider themselves a faithful churchgoer if they make it half the time, maybe twice a month, once a month even. People will often check the box on the survey of attending church in terms of their aspiration rather than their actual frequency. So, if there's someone who winds up sick with cancer, let's say, or is out of church for six months, they may still consider themselves a faithful churchgoer because if they were healthy, they would be there.

There are other people who are the same way. Even though they may be gone for three months doing travel ball every single Sunday with their kid, they may still consider themselves faithful churchgoers because that's how they see themselves. It's more of an aspirational understanding of their self-perception rather than a reality.

The studies show that larger churches are getting bigger, smaller churches are getting smaller, and this is where we must put that anecdotal evidence into context.

### **Church Online?**

But what about the pastoral sense that people no longer see in-person gathering as essential, opting instead for online church? The good news is stats show that people prefer physical gathering when they talk about church, as opposed to online attendance. Most people continue to see online church as a supplement, not a substitute.

But I do think there is something to be said here about the wider trend in our society of us viewing ourselves in digitalized terms more broadly. Because of how much time we spend

online both receiving information and broadcasting ourselves to others, we are consistently trying on identities. At some level, we are experimenting with how we want others to view us. We tend to see church as more of a badge that says something about who we are and how we present ourselves. (This is why many churches now have photo booths on special occasions!)

Another thing that happens here is that we confuse content with community. We think church is about downloading content from one person's brain into ours. As long as we can watch the video or listen to the podcast, we're good. We're not really in a position of seeing the church as a place of close connection or community that goes beyond helping us with our needs—yet is also inspiring, edifying, encouraging, and exhorting us to love, good deeds, and Christlikeness in our walks with Jesus.

### ***“Optional Church” Not New***

Now, the idea that church is optional in the life of the Christian is something we've seen reflected in statistics and surveys for years. I don't want to look back at previous generations with any sort of judgment or disdain, but back in the 1950s and '60s when church attendance was at an all-time high in the years following the second World War, many evangelists and church leaders wanted to make clear the difference between cultural Christianity and saving faith. The way they did this was by trying to make a differentiation between churchgoing and salvation. You'd hear evangelists and church leaders say things like “Going to church doesn't make you a Christian!” which of course is true. Many people go to church yet may not be true believers in Jesus. But somewhere along the way, that conversation about going to church not making you a Christian got transformed to mean if you're a Christian, that doesn't mean you necessarily will go to church.

Ten years ago, only 35% of professing Christians in the United States considered churchgoing to be essential to the Christian life. It's optional for many people, and that's been happening for a long time. That's not anything new. Covid demonstrated this shift even more so. During Covid, we saw the best of the church, yet we also saw the church's superficial state as well.

### ***Secularization At College?***

Additionally, secularization is now creeping back into Christian families. Many people assume that the church is losing her young people when they go off to college. The reality is more depressing. We're losing a lot of our young people when they're in high school. We're already seeing this disengagement from the church earlier rather than later.

### ***Implications for a Post-Covid World***

If families are the primary place where discipleship takes place, and research bears this notion out, then we need to understand the implications of discipleship in our post-Covid world. Let's take everything we just talked about and begin to ask questions about applying some of our disciple-making responsibility to the new cultural era we find ourselves in.

### ***Equipping the Household***

First, we need to see the household as the primary place for faith formation. **Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk's book *Handing Down the Faith*** details the key differences between families who are successful in handing down their faith and those who are not. But one of the things that almost everyone in America sees—whether or not this is necessarily helpful—is that family is considered the chief place of formation.

When the family that is responsible for passing down the faith also views church as an optional add-on to their lives, what exactly is the faith that these families wind up handing down? Unfortunately, it's not always orthodox Christianity. Many people in the United States see religion as simply a source of stability, a grounding moral ballast for living a successful life as defined by twenty-first century Americans. So unfortunately, the faith parents think they are handing down is not always the faith, once for all delivered to the saints. They may be passing along some good values, but it's not always true Christianity, and we must reckon with that. The truth remains, though, that the family is the primary place where this sort of discipleship is going to happen, and the church had better help families do that job well.



So, what are we doing right now to make the household a place of robust faith? How we answer that question will make the difference. We need the church itself to be a place of substantive faith, but we also need our homes to fulfill this same mission. JD Greear's church, The Summit Church, talks about how every pastor is a missions pastor. They say everyone on staff should see themselves as a missions pastor. Everybody's about the mission. Let's extend that analogy into this important arena. What if every person on your staff saw themselves as a family discipleship pastor?

How are we all working to help our families form the faith of the next generation? What are we doing as the church to accomplish this ourselves, and how are we helping parents, grandparents, and older siblings pass down the faith? An emphasis on the household and on our discipleship within the home will be vital. So, in what ways are we helping parents form the faith of the next generation as they're also forming their own faith at the same time? That's one question.

In her book *Nothing Less*, Jana Magruder compiled the data from a Lifeway Research study that looked at the patterns of young people raised in the church. The research indicated that children who remained faithful as young adults grew up in homes where certain practices were present. The biggest factor found in the data was perhaps the simplest Sunday school answer a churchgoer would give when asked, "What helps us remain close to God?" Bible reading. Unsurprisingly, children who regularly read the Bible while growing up were more likely to maintain that habit and have vibrant spiritual lives upon reaching adulthood. The next two are simple yet profound means of strengthening our kids as they follow God: prayer and service—not just church attendance, but service. It wasn't just that parents took their kids to church (where "professional clergy" could feed them spiritually), but that the children were integrated into the church through the avenue of serving others. Then we found that singing Christian songs made a difference in the lives of our kids. St. Augustine was quoted as saying, "We sing the truth into our hearts," and this ancient observation remains true. When we sing together as congregations and when we sing songs that fortify our faith, we reinforce the beauty of our faith.

For decades now, many Christians have assumed that certain church programs are key factors in a child's spiritual development: Vacation Bible school, youth group activities, Sunday school, and so on. But research shows that these programs make an impact when connected to consistent habits of prayer, Bible reading, praise, and service. It's the culture of the family and church and how they integrate children and young people into these spiritual disciplines. Also notable is the impact of parents' examples of reading Scripture, taking part in service projects, sharing their faith, and asking forgiveness for sins. In other words, the more the repentant, joyful Christian life was modeled, the more likely children were to remain in the faith.

What kind of culture do we want in our homes and churches? What spaces are we creating for our children to flourish? How are we rooting our families in God's Word, modeling prayer, repentance, and faithfulness in our homes? What songs are in our hearts and on our lips? How are we fulfilling the Great Commission? These are the big questions we must ask as we consider the role of discipleship, not just in the church but within our homes, then branching out to our communities. Our actions as families and as church communities show what we value, and the next generation models the values that we model for them.

### *Pursue Christian Education*

Jimmy Scroggins and I are working on an initiative for the coming months with NAMB where we are encouraging pastors all across the convention to begin thinking like parish priests did in the 1800s, during an era of anti-Catholic bigotry. One of the ways Catholics were able to maintain their identity at a time when virtually all of America was Protestant and dead set against any sort of Catholic identity was through education. They started schools, parishes, and neighborhood churches, and they got their kids into Catholic education, which is one of the ways Catholicism flourished.

Now, we are in a moment where the cultural winds are turning in such a direction that we are going to increasingly find ourselves at odds with our society when it comes to the basic, fundamental realities of life that we need to teach to our children. You'll find even in red states now the gender unicorn and other aspects of identity that go against the Bible's teachings not

only on marriage, but also on what it means to be made in the image of God, as male and female. But those are only some of the aspects we should consider when it comes to education.

Education is about knowing God and knowing others, loving God and loving others. If the goal of education is love, a secular education can't really give you that. It can give you tools for becoming productive and finding a good job in life or making it to college, but that's different than education transposed in a Christian key, to use a musical metaphor. Christian education involves moral formation and worldview instruction. That's why I think pastors need to be thinking like parish priests in the 1800s, and we likewise need to be thinking: *How do I serve my neighborhood when it comes to education?*

Think of it in terms of outreach. This isn't just a Benedict Option sort of retreat from the culture. Many people in our neighborhoods have enough sense to know that they do not appreciate the agendas being pushed in secular schools, but they don't know how to express their concern and don't know where they should go. The church can and should be a place of moral sanity for families who have enough of the truth in them to recognize that our contemporary culture has started to detach from reality in the gender arena. Or, you can think of it in terms of just keeping the kids we've got—shielding students from full immersion into an out of control ideology.

Either way, if you have education space that's sitting unused throughout the week, you should consider hosting that space for a micro-school or a homeschool co-op or Christian education space throughout the week. Or, what if you joined with another church or two and started a Christian school?

I know that scares the living daylights out of some people because they're thinking about all the difficulties of trying to run a Christian school while also running a church, to which I say, yes, you shouldn't have to do that. You shouldn't want to do that. Your primary calling is the church, but there are ways to set up a Christian school that will not be a drain on the church, but rather an opportunity for outreach and growth. It's a way to suddenly have people from the neighborhood in your facilities all the time, which opens doors for them to start attending your church. You can set up the governing documents in such a way that the church and school are somewhat separate, even if they use the same facility. And you can also, in a

situation like this, begin thinking of Christian education not as a distraction from discipleship, but as an extension of discipleship. We've got to get there.

I'm not saying there needs to be some mass exodus from the public schools or that every believing public school teacher should give up their job and teach at a Christian school or that every Christian kid needs to be doing something else. I realize there are all sorts of challenges and cultural complexities in that regard, but we need to think through how we can make Christian education affordable and available to our communities. Most Christian schools have waiting lists already, and I'm just throwing this out there as something that needs to be on the table as we talk about discipling the next generation.

### *People Over Programs*

Another implication for discipleship in the post-Covid world is that we've got to prioritize people over programs. If you're waiting for the next program to come out of Lifeway or the North American Mission Board or whatever it might be as the silver bullet for discipleship, you're going to be waiting a long time. Culturally, things are more complex than they have been. People resist one-size-fits-all approaches to discipleship, anyway.

One of the best things that can happen when we talk about prioritizing people over programs is that we simply try to facilitate or get people into each other's homes as much as possible, though I recognize that this is a challenge for many. But I think it starts right there. We hope that people who are not that interested or who are more at the periphery will get brought in and become more engaged, but we can't wait on that to happen. We've got to go for the people we have right in front of us—people over programs.

### *The Larger Church as Cathedral*

One last thing I would say is that if you're here and you're part of a larger church, a mega church, if you're at over 500 or 1000 people and you have a lot of resources, you need to begin thinking like cathedrals that help other congregations in the parish. This is a recommendation my friend Jake Meador has made. Don't think of yourself as competition for

the others. You need to begin thinking of the other churches as neighborhood churches and that maybe you are the cathedral. Other denominations and faith traditions see the cathedral as a place of collaboration and shared resources. This will take a level of partnership that we're not as well acquainted with in the Southern Baptist Convention, but I think it will be essential for the days ahead. It will put us in a place where we don't compete for resources, but where we see resources as entities to be shared with those on similar mission. Those who have been blessed with a lot can bless others a lot.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, we are in a new era when it comes to the implications of “de-churching” taking place across the country. We are in an increasingly secularizing environment, yet our mission has never been more sure. Times of turbulence and shifting cultural trends give us an opportunity to recommit our lives to expanding God’s kingdom. We aim to see disciples multiplied and churches planted, as we pursue a missionary encounter with the world we’re called to reach. The church is in crisis as it always is and has been. Yet the church is also stable, as Jesus said it always will be. Jesus is the One who has promised to build His church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.