

# THE Christian Citizen

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From  
Generation  
to Generation

VOLUME 1, 2014

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## discipleSHIFT: Young Adults and the Church

**“W**hat is the problem with the American church today?” This is the question I was asked by a producer for “Nightline.” And I responded: “Churches are full of believers but have few disciples.”

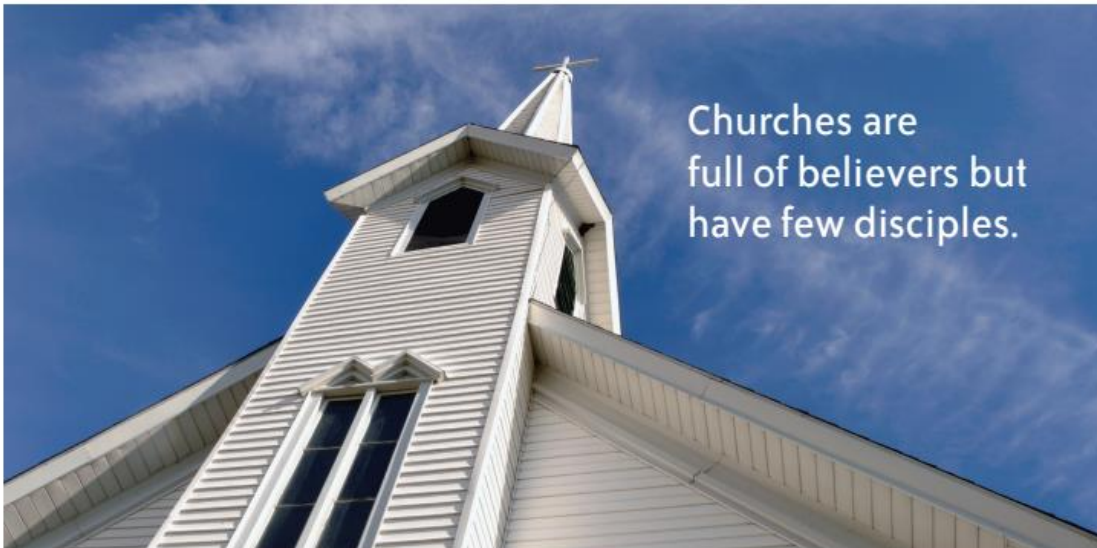
It is clear that, overall, what we have been doing to make fully committed followers of Christ isn’t working. Our efforts have not been successful in creating authentic Christian disciples—followers of Jesus who have the capacity to turn this world upside down as was said of Christ’s first-century disciples (Acts 17:6). It is no longer possible to effectively present the gospel or to nurture believers using the same basic methods as employed in the second half of the last century, a time when many of us were “raised in the Lord.” The days of programmatic discipleship-formation are over—or ought to be. It is clear that we need to make a shift in both the mentality of disciple-making (why we do it) and in the modality of disciple-making (how we do it).

We must shift from a linear to a dynamic model: from the academic to the experiential; the institutional-

focused to the individual-focused; the structured to the spontaneous. We need to move from monologue to dialogue: from talking to listening and from engaged heads to engaged hands; from orthodoxy to orthopraxy; from program to personal; from content to contextual. And especially from *learning* the Book to *living* the Book.

That’s it. What we need in discipleship is a shift—*discipleSHIFT*. Back to the way things were and were done, not in the 20th century, but 20 centuries ago. We live in a world today that resembles the world of the ancient, early church. Most churches want to go back in time anyway. The problem is they want to go back to what they perceive to be their glory days. What they need to do is go back to the days when the glory of the Lord was touching countless lives—back to the time when the first disciples were made, in response to the mandate of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 28:19, “*Go and make disciples.*”

The world then and the world now have much in common. Both are characterized by huge unreached people groups, spiritual pluralism, the West as a mission



field, international migration, globalization, poverty, urbanization, oral learners, multiculturalism, global economy, moral relativism and a population majority under age 30. If they could do it then, with fewer overall resources than we have now, we can do it today.

The following four basic elements of first-century disciple-making can serve us well in the 21st century.

- **The biographical:** an understanding, in light of the age's emphasis on the narrative, that everyone had a story to tell and a story to live. Paul frequently told the story of his life before Christ, the tale of his encounter with Christ, and then about his new life since that encounter with Christ. (See, for example, Acts 22-26.) There is a clear expectation of a life of a different sort beyond the faith commitment. That expectation is where discipleship takes place. It is a learn-by-living model—not just Christ living in us, but us living life for Christ by living life for the sake of others.
- **The conversational:** Similar to today, the worldview was one of no absolute truth. People didn't accept things at face value. It took time to discuss and decide. We see this phenomenon in Acts 17, when Paul speaks in Athens. After hearing him out, the people respond by saying they need to talk it through. They are interested but not immediately invested. Twentieth-century discipleship, especially in the latter half of the last century, has focused on an academic model of information download—the expectation that by simply imparting and implanting truth, a person would grow. Now we know that the individual needs to interact. There needs to be a give and take—a back and forth—working out the dynamics of one's salvation in real-life situations.
- **The relational:** When people spent enough quality time together, they got to know better not only each other but also the Lord. Acts tells of Paul spending 1½ years in the city of Corinth and then later two years in the city of Ephesus. This was not a single-week crusade designed to bring people to faith but to see people come to faith in Christ and helping them mature. It was about getting to know people, and people getting to know Jesus. It recognized that much is to be learned over the long haul through a process that cannot be rushed or pushed. Extended time together allows for finding common ground, growing faith and increased connectedness with each other—connectedness to something larger than ourselves.
- **The incarnational:** "Faith without works is dead," James would write of first-century discipleship. People may or may not remember what we say, but they will definitely not forget what we do. The old



adage "actions speak louder than words" is, indeed, true. Acts 9 mentions nothing that Dorcas said, but it records what she did for the widows, who were a marginalized, disenfranchised group in the first century. Acts 19 tells of Paul using his God-given tent-making skills to connect with other believers as well as non-believers. Paul and Dorcas each used their talents and abilities to mature in their own faith as well as to nurture the faith of others—lived out in daily life. This is hands-on, life-relevant and experiential. People are looking for *service* on Saturday, not *a service* on Sunday.

An intentional shift today to a multifaceted, embedded model of discipleship can result in a converted seeker, a connected believer and a committed disciple. If that is what we want, we need to change our ways, so they can change theirs.

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