

WHERE ARE YOU HEADED?
#2. Direction
Hebrews 6:1-3, Matthew 13:18-23

Life is like a journey. We are all headed somewhere. Whether we have set out goals and objectives, whether we are just taking one day at a time, or whether we are just drifting along without much thought, we're all headed somewhere. So it only makes sense that we're all headed somewhere in the Christian life as well. That's what we're going to talk about this morning. Direction.

A few years ago, Thom Rainer wrote a book called "The Unchurched Next Door". In it, he describes five markers in an unchurched person's life. It's called the Rainer Scale. The letter U stands for Unchurched. Can you think of someone you know who fits each of these five categories?

U5 describes a person who is antagonistic or hostile to the good news of Jesus.

U4 describes someone who is resistant, but not antagonistic.

U3 describes someone who has no strong opinions one way, or another, about the gospel but is open to discussion.

U2 describes someone who is receptive to the good news about Jesus and the church.

U1 describes someone who is highly receptive to the gospel. This group often makes a personal commitment to Jesus.

Now the scale changes once a person has made a commitment to Jesus Christ. The letter U changes to D for Disciple. A number of researchers have written about the discipleship track so let me summarize their findings.

D1 is a "baby" in Christ, a new Christian, who is finding their way and still has many questions.

D2 is when that Christian begins to show signs of spiritual maturity, such as asking to be baptized

D3 is when they become part of a local congregation and learn to serve at some level.

D4 is when they are maturing in their faith, and have developed regular patterns of prayer, bible study, stewardship and ministry.

D5 is when they share their faith with others, that is, when they become disciple makers.

Remember everyone is headed somewhere! I may be forward. It may be back. But the real question is, where are you headed right now?

By the way, there is ample evidence of the truth of those scales in Scripture. For example Hebrews 6:1 says: **"So let us stop going over the basic teachings about Christ again and again. Let us go on instead and become mature in our understanding."** And Hebrews 11:14, **"Milk is for beginners, inexperienced in God's ways; solid food is for the mature, who have some practice in telling right from wrong."**

Jesus even spoke about the different ways people receive the gospel when he interpreted The Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:18-23 (Msg).

"Study this story of the farmer planting seed. When anyone hears news of the kingdom and doesn't take it in, it just remains on the surface, and so the Evil One comes along and plucks it right out of that person's heart. This is the seed the farmer scatters on the road.

The seed cast in the gravel—this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.

The seed cast in the weeds is the person who hears the kingdom news, but weeds of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard, and nothing comes of it.

23 "The seed cast on good earth is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams."

The simple point Jesus makes is that, people receive the gospel in different ways, and do different things with it, but only some become productive disciples in God's Kingdom. So here's what I want to suggest to you today. You have all been on a spiritual road trip or you simply wouldn't be here today, and some of you have had to travel further than others!

Some of you started as an Unchurched 5. You were once antagonistic or hostile to the Christian faith. But by God's grace, the Holy Spirit led you to a point where you decided to follow Jesus. If this describes you, you may have a vivid memory of the exact day you gave your life to Christ. Some of you, like me, started as an Unchurched 1, someone who grew up in the church, and because of that was highly receptive to the good news of Jesus. For us, making a personal commitment of our lives to Jesus was so natural that we can't particularly remember the day or time that it happened.

Now don't miss the sub- theme in the Parable of the Sower. It's the theme of personal responsibility. Jesus says that the "seed is the Word of God" but the soil is each person's life. So it is each individual who must ultimately decide what they will do with the "seed", the good news of Jesus Christ.

The idea of personal responsibility is also found in the Old Testament when God speaks to the people of Israel. Deuteronomy 30:15, "**Today I am giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death. Obey and be blessed, disobey and be destroyed.**" That's what Scripture says. Jesus puts the issue of personal choice this way in Luke 6:46, "**So why do you keep calling me 'Lord, Lord!' when you don't do what I say?"**" In those words, Jesus places the responsibility for faith, obedience, action, and the spiritual growth that comes with it, squarely on the person who has said, "I believe".

I believe. Whatever our Christian heritage might be there comes a time when we all have to make a choice, a personal decision to "follow Jesus." Faith, you see, only sticks in the long term when we embrace Jesus personally. We see that when Paul writes to his much younger partner- in- ministry Timothy in Second Timothy 1:4-6, "**I remember your genuine faith, for you share the faith that first filled your grandmother Lois and your mother, Eunice. And I know that same faith continues strong in you. 6 This is why I remind you to fan into flames the spiritual gift God gave you when I laid my hands on you.**" Timothy had a godly mother and grandmother, but Paul reminds him of the importance of his own personal faith commitment.

The great challenge facing the church today, is that in a period of around 50 years, the religious landscape we live in has changed dramatically. Unless we understand this, we will not understand why a strong personal faith, and being passionate and deeply committed disciples of Jesus, is so absolutely essential today. Church historians talk about the three paradigms of the Church, three lenses through which to understand the Church.

The first paradigm is called *The Apostolic Paradigm*. It refers to the first 300 years of Christianity when the Church was persecuted, when it was small in numbers, and where Christians were often martyred for their faith.

The second paradigm is called *The Christendom Paradigm*. It began with the Emperor Constantine becoming a Christian in the early fourth century, and then declaring the Holy Roman Empire to be Christian. This led to the idea of the secular state cooperating with the Church, supporting Christian values, and pursuing policies that left the Church in the western world very

influential and wealthy. This paradigm lasted around 1700 years and has only disintegrated in our lifetimes.

The new paradigm, the one that has been birthed in our lifetimes, is called the *The Post-Christendom Paradigm*. Once again Christians in the western world are becoming a minority, and the Church has been moved from the mainline to the sidelines of our society. Some would even argue that the state, which supported Christian values, now pursues and promotes values that are not biblical. The Christian future of Canada is now in doubt.

Now *The Christendom Paradigm* has had a massive impact on the way we learned to think about discipleship. In Christendom, the road trip to discipleship looked a lot like this:

- Canada is a Christian country and so I am Christian.
- I am a Christian, even if I never go to church.
- I am Christian, even if I don't believe in the Bible.

So what do you hear many secular people say today? "I am a Christian but I don't believe in the Church". "I am spiritual but I'm not religious".

Here's the present day problem with *The Christendom Paradigm*, and I think it only now becoming apparent to us. Over the long history of that paradigm it became assumed, that because you grew up in Western society where the Church was deeply imbedded then, by association, you were a Christian. So we stopped challenging people to make a personal commitment of their life to Christ and Christianity became a cultural faith, not a personal one. Today, that creates huge new challenges for the Church.

Here are some other assumptions the Christendom Paradigm created. And let me suggest that these are no longer valid assumptions in our present culture:

- That, "if we build it they will come."
- That people know the basic Bible stories including the story of Jesus.
- That people know the basic beliefs of Christianity.
- That people believe that the Bible is, as Presbyterians believe, "*given to us by the inspiration of God to be the rule of faith and life.*" (Living Faith 5:1)
- That people know the old familiar hymns of the church.

Now those realities have huge implications for what it means us as we go into the world to make disciples. It means:

- We can't start where we used to start.

- We can't make the assumptions we used to make.
- We can't pin our hopes on Christendom coming back because it clearly isn't.
- We can't assume people will find their own way to faith, or that when they do, they can navigate the faith without help.

That means we need to show others by our personal example what a disciple of Jesus looks like. To do that we need to cultivate our own spiritual roots by taking our own personal faith development to a new level. This is our urgent task.

Here's the reality. It's not going to get any easier being a Christian, or being a Christian congregation, in the future. In fact, it's going to be much harder because this *Post- Christendom*, - or *Post Christian Paradigm* - that we have now entered is uncharted territory. None of us have ever been this way before. This new paradigm is a radical departure from the past. We have to learn, all over again, how to be a "missional" church.

We really are much more like the first Christians who followed Jesus, than the Christians of previous generations who lived in the Christendom paradigm. We really are much more like the Christians in the early Church, who had to step out in faith by simply trusting God, and relying on the leading of the Holy Spirit. Friends, make no mistake. God is calling us to a whole new level of personal faith and discipleship. But here's the good news. The promise of Jesus is still as true for us as it was back then, Matthew 28:20, "*I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*"

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, Saviour of our souls,
King and Head of the Church,
we pray for your Church in thee challenging times, and
we pray for the faith to follow where you lead us,
even when the way is unknown and unfamiliar to us.
Keep our hearts faithful to you.
Keep our eyes fixed on you.
Keep our minds clear from the distractions the world offers.
And teach us to walk by faith and no by sight
as we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Almighty God, we pray for the world around us, that your presence would be made known.

We pray for love to flow down into those places filled with hate. We pray for comfort to bless the lives of the grieving.

We pray for peace to abide in the lives of those who are troubled in spirit.

We pray down protection upon the firefighters in British Columbia, and strength for those displaced from their homes.

We pray for wisdom for our world leaders who face difficult challenges threatening peace and unity on so many fronts.

All these things we pray in Jesus Name. Amen.