

Are You a Disciple? ... or Just Part of the Crowd?

Besides being the Year of the Dragon in China, 2012 is full of global observances. World Peace Day was Jan. 1, World Rabies Day is Sept. 22 and the World Day for Laboratory Animals (huh?) is April 24. There is also Global Hand-washing Day (Oct. 15), Star Wars Day (May 4), International Cat Day (March 1), and—for all Johnny Depp fans—International Talk Like a Pirate Day (Sept. 19).

I don't know who comes up with these odd celebrations, but I'd like to add one more. Can we declare 2012 the Year of Discipleship?

This would be an appropriate time for it, since Jesus had 12 disciples, and that number won't be showing up for a while as far as years go. But I doubt 2012YD would inspire much more than a corporate yawn. Discipleship is just not popular, even though the word figures prominently in the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:19, NASB).

Notice that Jesus did not say, "Go therefore and make converts," "Go therefore and gather crowds" or "Go therefore and build churches," even though those things aren't wrong. The mandate is very specific. Jesus wants disciples, or "taught ones"; He wants followers who know Him intimately, who have surrendered fully to His will, and who can impart His life to others. He wants mature sons and daughters who reflect His character.

As I have reread the gospels over the past few months, I've noticed the Scriptures offer a clear contrast between the fickle crowds who followed Jesus to get something from Him, and the small group of disciples who turned the world upside

down after He left the planet. It's no different today. Jesus has tons of followers on any given Sunday, and those crowds know how to fill seats, make noise and "have church." Our problem is not quantity. What we lack is quality.

In Jesus' day, the crowds chased miracles while the disciples hung around for private mentoring. The crowds showed up for the free lunches; the disciples fed the crowds after Jesus blessed the loaves and fish, and they learned about faith in the process. The crowds listened to a few sermons, and oohed and aahed over Jesus' amazing authority, but when He started talking about repentance and the necessity of the cross, people lost interest. Crowds thin out when the message gets tough.

It was German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life." He was troubled by the lack of discipleship in the German church in the 1930s, and he blamed it on a flimsy message coming from pulpits. He wrote: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ."

Here in the United States, cheap grace is just one of many methods we use to draw crowds. We've also twisted Scriptures to promise people prosperity, and we've manipulated the Holy Ghost to entertain people who need an emotional high to get them through another week. Since people are not interested in the discipline of prayer, or in developing personal integrity, or in how to resolve marital problems, or in crucifying the flesh, we offer a smorgasbord of exotic charismatic delights to put Band-Aids on wounds. We turned church into an ear-tickling show and worked everybody up into a frenzy, but in the end nobody's character was changed.

In some churches, regular prayer and consistent Bible study are viewed as “religious” and unhip. We prefer something sexier in the age of attention deficit disorder. We want the Word shortened into Tweet-sized sound bites, and we want our pastors to keep the message under 20 minutes because we have places to go. We want the gospel spoon-fed to us on our terms. And we don’t want any of those politically incorrect “hard sayings” about hell or sexual morality.

In 2012, I believe Jesus wants us to repent of our selfish, adolescent ways. He is calling us to grow up. Let’s stop chasing miracles and become miracle-workers; let’s stop manipulating God to bless us and instead submit our lives to His surgery. Let’s abandon cheap grace and return to the Cross. Let’s re-enlist in His school of discipleship, even if it means we have to leave the crowd behind.

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