

Steps to Discipleship #2: Creating Credible Connections
Acts 18:1-11, Col 4:1-6, 1 Peter 3:15-17

Brothers and sisters, it was ten years ago that the Barna Group spent some time polling non-Christian young adults to find out what they really thought about Christianity, and discovered that we are perceived as judgmental, hypocritical, anti-homosexual, too political, insensitive—and boring...

And while I feel compelled for honesty's sake to point out that these are American Christians... I doubt that we as Canadian Christian would fare any better in such a survey and from what I see on social media and Facebook these days it's quite clear that these negative perceptions have not improved much if any over in the past ten years.

But what's particularly disturbing about the initial survey is that 50% of the participants said that they base their negative perception of Christianity, on their personal interaction with other Christians!

And this fact my friends, reveals that we face a credibility challenge when it comes to connecting with the community as Christians who are intent on making disciples. The truth of the matter is that there are many people in our community who do not find Christians to be credible witnesses for the faith they represent or the truth they proclaim.

And it's important that we realize this brothers and sisters.

Last Sunday as we focused on Step #1 in the Disciple Making Process, where we need to GO OUT and make incarnational connections with people, and after learning the amazing significance which making those kinds of connections has... we might be surprised and discouraged when our efforts to incarnationally connect with people is not received with open arms but with suspicion and mistrust, and maybe even some hostility.

So brothers and sisters we need to be aware that this is the reality we will face and understand that we need to train

ourselves respond to these situations in the same manner as we train people to be defensive drivers.

Because in Defensive Driving it doesn't matter if you had the right of way or you had the green light at an intersection, if someone runs that red light and hits your vehicle... you are still in an accident, you still sustain damage to your car, and you are still at risk of being injured yourself. The fact that you aren't at fault doesn't really matter in these things.

So, in Defensive Driving training you learn to anticipate and watch out for other people's errors and mistakes and what you can do to avoid them or respond to them if need be.

For example, every time you approach an intersection – even if you have the green light, you ALWAYS do a visual check from the left, to the center and to the right to ensure that all other vehicles have stopped at the intersection and no one is running a red light and that it is clear for you to proceed through.

In the same way friends, it doesn't really matter if these negative perceptions of Christianity are correct or accurate or a fair representation of what most Christians are like or not... the fact is that this is what many people think and it affects our credibility with them.

Because like it or not brothers and sisters, **credibility is believe-ability**, and if people don't believe we are credible witnesses for Jesus Christ they will not listen or take seriously or believe what we have to share with them about Jesus – regardless of how true or scripturally correct it might be.

So, that is why step #2 in the disciple making process is creating credible connections.

We want to become aware of and learn some specific things that we can do so that we can build up our credibility with non-Christians, in order to – as Young Life puts it - *“earn the right to be heard...”* or as the Apostle Paul states it to **“be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.”** (Col 4:5)

Now, part of learning what we can do - is also identifying what we shouldn't do...

It is not wise, nor a good use of every opportunity that comes our way when we try to build our credibility with non-believers by countering their negative perceptions of Christianity by using the "I'm a Christian but I'm not _____" approach... do you know what I mean?

"I'm a Christian - but I'm not judgmental, I'm a Christian - but I'm not hypocritical, I'm a Christian - but I'm not one of those bible thumping fundamentalists..."

Friends that approach gets us off on the wrong foot, it's hard to build genuine credibility with people by defining what we are not, instead of who we are.

Remember as well that for many people the message of the Christian faith IS offensive and difficult to take. The O.T. prophets called Christ the stone that would make people stumble, Paul says his message is foolishness to the Greeks

and scandal to the Jews he suffered much opposition and persecution from both – we read about that in Acts 18:6 where the Jews in Corinth became abusive to Paul as he tried to teach and explain to them that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

And in 2 Cor 2:16 he says *"To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume."* (NLT)

The point is brothers and sisters, that some of the negative perceptions which people have about Christianity may just be their own struggles and difficulties with the gospel, the truth of the scriptures and the response that God requires from us.

If we attempt to build credibility with non-believers by starting off our interaction with them by presenting ourselves as "I'm a Christian but I'm not _____" we may end up painting ourselves into a corner that we can't get out of – unless we compromise some important part of the Christian faith.

Let me show you how that happens. Some believer says *“Hi I’m a Christian but I’m not judgmental!”*

And the response comes back *“Oh, so you won’t say that I’m a sinner who is in danger of going to Hell unless I believe in your Jesus? Because I don’t appreciate that, I find it offensive and I consider it to be very judgmental!”*

So now this believer is thinking *“Oh... well I’m a Christian and I’m not... judgmental... so I guess that means I won’t say that, and perhaps I need to reconsider if I really believe that or not, since I can see how that might come across as judgmental...”*

Do you see how this can happen, friends?

The *“I’m a Christian but I’m not _____”* approach does not build credible connections as part of the discipleship process; it sets you up to compromise the faith in order to be seen as acceptable by non-Christians.

And being seen as acceptable by non-Christians is not the same as having credibility with them for the purposes of making disciples.

The starting point for building credible connections with non-Christians is a confidence in knowing who you really are in Christ... because you know who Christ really is!

So the apostle Peter says to us *“in your hearts revere Christ as Lord.”* (1 Peter 3:15) That means Jesus Christ is at the center of your life, you hold Him in the highest esteem, you respect Him, you are in awe of Him... because of who He is; fully God incarnate as we learned last week and because of what He has done to substitute Himself in our place.

Brothers and sisters if you revere Christ as Lord in your hearts, in the central place of your life and who you are – then it works its way out and shows itself and gives you authenticity as a follower of Jesus Christ.

Because friends – even if people have negative perceptions of Christians, if Jesus is the center of your life in such a way that it shows, it builds you credibility to speak about Jesus.

Think about it in this way, as adults we have a certain automatic mistrust and negative perceptions of youth culture and its various expressions in music and fashion and trends.

But let's say that you wanted to buy a gift for your teenaged son or daughter, and you wanted to get them a gift that appeals to them and reflects what *"the youth are into these days."*

That's a daunting task for a parent and you risk flubbing it up in a major way, but you head over to the mall anyways and you go into a shop and ask for some advice from a store clerk.

Now if the store clerk "reveres youth culture in their heart" it's going to show up in how they dress and talk and conduct themselves with you and what they have tattooed on their arms...

And even though you have negative perceptions about them – especially the tattoos - in this situation it lends them a certain credibility to their recommendation about what is cool, or sick, or dank, or whatever the kids are saying these days – and your teenager will probably really like what they recommend.

So brothers and sisters – form your identity, establish who you are by revering Christ in your hearts, in the center of your life and this begins to build your credibility with non-believers.

Then as Peter says *"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."* (1 Peter 3:15)

Friends, your credibility in your connections with non-Christians will continue to increase when you are able to offer reasonable explanations for the Christian faith.

Now I'm not saying that you have to become a theologian or a bible scholar or an expert apologist like C.S. Lewis or Lee

Strobel – you just need to be able to explain to non-Christians why you are convicted that you are a sinner in need of Jesus’ forgiveness, why you believe the Bible is the revelation from God that points us to Jesus as savior, and why Jesus has become the one who determines what you do with your life now....

I think even we have a hard time seeing the credibility in someone whom we know is just socially or nominally religious and just goes through the motions without thinking about it or being able to explain why they do what they do.

And make sure your answers are clear; don’t assume other people - especially non-Christians, automatically know the meaning of Christian buzz-words or catch phrases like “got born again” or “backsliding” or “covered by the blood of the lamb” or “asking Jesus into your heart” and so on...

As the Apostle Paul says in Col 4:6 *“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”*

Or to put in another way that we’ve already looked in a previous series, you need to know How to tell your story really well when you recognize spiritual thirst in someone and you want to respond appropriately.

And brothers and sisters, while we certainly want to go out and connect with whomever the Holy Spirit puts in our path and points out to us – it doesn’t hurt to use our creational wisdom and seek out those with whom it is easy to make connections because we already have something in common with them – like race or vocation.

We read about the apostle Paul’s ministry efforts in the city of Corinth from Acts 18 this morning and you’ll notice that whenever Paul arrived in a city to begin ministry he always sought out his fellow Jews and their local synagogue and made connections with them.

Since he was also a Jew and had the credentials of a Pharisee, he automatically had some credibility with these people that

he could leverage towards building his credibility as a witness to present Jesus as the Messiah to them.

And in this particular instance Paul discovered that he had something else in common with his Jewish contacts in Corinth, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, they were tentmakers as was he.

So this sharing of vocation, having the same skills and a common familiarity in a trade provided him with further basis for credibility with them, and Paul leveraged that credibility towards being able to spend time with them, as it says in Acts 18:4-3 *“Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them.”*

And we know how this works right? When we meet someone who has the same racial background as us there is a built-in connection which carries some existing trust and credibility with it because we feel like we know that person a little bit already – even though we don’t.

I always find it interesting to see how the level of customer service I receive or the kind of relational interaction I have with the staff changes when I walk into Home Depot or Rona or Lowes when I’m in my work boots and work cloths and I have a tape measure on my belt and a pencil behind my ear.

I find that there is a solidarity that the staff shares with me and I share with them – they relate to me as if I’m one of them, I know their world of building materials and construction and renovation, I have that in common with them and I have some credibility that I know what I’m doing.

Whereas when I I’m in khakis and a golf shirt they are polite and respectful but there’s no sense that I’m one them and they automatically assume that I have no clue as to what I’m doing, no credibility at all.

You see how this works? The apostle Paul certainly did.

So, as you work at Step #2 in the disciple making process: building credible connections with non-Christians, by all

means feel free to make use of the natural connections that exist with people whom you may share race and/or vocation or particular hobbies or interests in common which give you some built-in credibility to work with.

Because friends these kinds of common connections, that don't carry any negative perceptions with them, **set you up to be able to spend time with non-Christians.**

And as important as it is to have authenticity and the confidence of knowing who you are, and being able to give clear explanations and answer regarding the faith...

It's almost impossible to make credible connections with non-Christians without spending time... lots of time, being with them and "doing life with them. "

So, natural connections that allow you to easily do this are something that should be taken advantage of, and there is nothing wrong or "unspiritual" about doing this.

Now I suspect that we already know the truth of this creational wisdom about putting in time – and that we already make use of it when we have to get to know someone for other purposes...

My father always told me - spend at least a year getting to know someone before you would consider spending the rest of your life with them.

Why would it be any different for a non-Christian who knows next to nothing about Christians and Christianity except negative stereotypes to be able to trust us enough, for us to earn enough credibility with them to be able to speak and share with them about a relationship they will have for **eternity!**

And in fact, at the end of our reading from Acts 18 in vs. 11 we see that God gave the Apostle Paul a year and a half – 18 months – to stay in Corinth, to work among the Gentiles so that he can build up his credibility among them and earn their trust in order to share Jesus with them and establish a church.

So – so far we’ve seen that the starting points to build credibility with non-Christians through the authenticity that come from revering Christ in our heart; from knowing who we really are in Christ; and being able to clearly explain what we believe, and being able to deepen credibility through taking advantage of natural creational connections we share with people that allows us to put in time with them...

But we shouldn’t stop there...

To top this all off – to put our credibility with non-Christians in the bank so to speak, and let it earn interest and grow - **We need to be willing to suffer in some way for being a Christian.**

Whether it is putting up with the scorn and contempt and mockery that comes from negative stereotypes...

Whether it is making a sacrifice where you give something up because you belong to God that non-Christians consider foolish...

Like giving up your Sunday mornings to come and worship God, like 10% of your pay to give back to God, like letting God dictate how you express and act out your sexuality...

Or whether is it enduring the consequences that come from refusing to compromise what God calls you to do in spite of social pressure or the laws of the land...

When non-Christians see you suffering, even if they think it is foolish – it tends to seal in your credibility with them.

They may not agree with you, they may not believe what you believe, but if you’ve established any credibility with them **suffering will cause it to grow into respect...** and it will cause them to wonder if there really is something to this Christianity that they need to look into, since people are willing to sacrifice and suffer for it.

This is why Paul instructs the Colossian Christians in 4:2-3 to *“Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our*

message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.”

Paul knows that suffering for the gospel in this way is going to give him opportunities to share the message of Jesus Christ as the only way to know God and receive salvation.

And not just introductory or explanatory opportunities, but opportunities where he can be bold and call people to close the deal – repent from whatever else they trust in and turn to put their faith and trust in Jesus instead.

And the amazing thing is that when you put your credibility in the bank so to speak, through sacrifice and suffering, you are able to lend some of that credibility to your fellow believers.

In Phil 1:14 Paul tells the Philipian Christians not to be ashamed that he’s gotten in trouble with the authorities and has been imprisoned but to rejoice because other believers in the palace have become emboldened to share the gospel with non-Christians.

Paul’s suffering actually builds credibility with non-Christians - for other believers... who are then also able to be bold and call people to close the deal and repent and trust in Jesus.

Pretty amazing isn’t it!

So – brothers and sisters, Step #2 in the discipleship making process is all about making sure we build credible connections with non-Christians.

So don’t take the “I’m a Christian but I’m not _____ approach...”

Instead revere Christ in your hearts, know who you truly are, be able to give clear answers, take advantage of natural connections and put the credibility in the bank with other by being willing to sacrifice and suffer for the faith.

My the Lord give us the credibility we need through this to be able to Go out and make disciples of all nations. Amen