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CHAPTER 1

HALF-BRAINED CHRISTIANITY

AS I SAT ON A STREET CORNER one cold, Chicago night, I remember thinking, “If this is all there is to Christianity, maybe I should look into something else.”

I was discouraged. I had spent my whole life going to church. I attended private Christian schools, went to a Bible college, and I was in seminary preparing for ministry. If anyone understood Christianity, I figured it was me. The problem was that after all these years, I still felt like I was missing something important. I rarely felt close to God, and I was acutely aware of the enormous gap between the life I lived and the “abundant” life Christ promised (John 10:10). It was not that I never had good days. It was just that I had way too many days where I felt like I was just going through the motions.

Part of my problem was that I was the product of traditional discipleship, or what I sometimes call *half-brained Christianity*. I call it that because traditional discipleship is extremely left-brained in its focus. It stresses truth, choices, and discipline as keys to successful Christian

living. It also emphasizes the importance of volunteering and evangelizing, but it doesn't really address matters of the heart.

Traditional discipleship tends to outsource issues of the heart to professional counselors. I grew up in a generation of pastors who are inclined to see themselves as teachers and leaders, but who see counseling as something for specialists. We were trained how to teach the Bible well and prepare relevant sermons on topics that touched the heart, but most

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of us have no idea how to build a church that offers people solutions beyond traditional discipleship. I remember one pastor of a large and prosperous church saying, "I feel like my congregation is a boiling pot of emotional issues. If I even hinted that we could help people with their deep issues, I fear the pot would boil over. We would end up creating a mess that would be impossible to clean up."¹ I don't blame

the pastors as much as I blame a system that sees traditional discipleship as adequate.

In this opening chapter, I want to explain in more depth what traditional discipleship is and why it falls short of offering us the solutions we need to handle heart-level issues.

DISCIPLESHIP BY OSMOSIS

When my father was teaching at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, he had a student turn in a paper in which he shared the following testimony:

I have never been discipled, and I have been a Christian for twenty years. Because of not knowing who I am in Christ, I did not know how to walk according to the Spirit. Therefore, I have been living my life according to the flesh while gaining a lot of head knowledge about the Bible and God.

I have struggled so long because of my weakness to say no to myself, and I have really been ineffective for Christ. I was always told by those I opened up to what to do, but it never had any power in my life. I know a lot of theology, and I know everything I should do, but I do not bear much fruit, and I do not love others the way God wants me to.

I feel like a baby Christian because I have to start at the basics again and reprogram my faulty ways of thinking. I have grown up with a poor self-esteem, self-condemnation, self-hatred, bitterness, rebellion, perfectionism, anxiety, and a weak functional faith.²

Clearly, this young man was ready for a different kind of Christianity. He was ready to go deeper than where traditional discipleship could take him. He was looking for heart-focused discipleship—which I'll explain in detail in the next chapter.

He is not the only one who struggles. In a well-known report issued by the Willow Creek Association, it was suggested that as many as 25 percent of church members describe their walk with God as stalled or dissatisfying.³ In response to this report, many churches launched a back-to-basics movement and called for more discipleship in the church. The problem, from my perspective, was that too many churches responded by returning to the traditional discipleship model that had created the situation in the first place.

What further complicates the issue is that some churches don't even practice traditional discipleship well. They are stuck in a process that is something like osmosis.

Discipleship by osmosis is sort of like discipleship by assumption. It assumes that if you join the church and hang around long enough, you will get discipled. It is a bit like sticking a Spanish textbook under your pillow and hoping you will learn how to speak Spanish by having it in the area.

The process usually looks like this: You start attending a church, and after a while, someone asks you to volunteer. If you are faithful as a

volunteer, you are soon asked to lead. If you are faithful as a leader, you can find yourself in the inner circle of power in that church without ever being disciplined.

This scenario happened to a friend of mine. He was in full-time Christian ministry at a parachurch organization, served faithfully in the local church, and was eventually voted onto the elder board. But one day, he sat down in my office and cried as he described a life that was starting to fall apart. What he told me that day has stayed with me ever since.

He said, “I’ve been in the church and in full-time Christian ministry since I was in college, and I have never been disciplined.”

I could sense his anger and growing frustration. He knew much of what he was going through was his own fault. But he was also beginning to wonder how it was possible to get as far as he had without anyone helping him. This wonderful man was almost taken out because everyone assumed he was being disciplined, when he was really just a very faithful worker. He was a victim of discipleship by osmosis.

TRADITIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

The traditional discipleship model with which I was raised stressed will power, academic training, and church activity as the keys to living a successful Christian life. So, when I talk about traditional discipleship, I often think of the ABCs of most discipleship programs: academics, behavior, and church activity.

Academics

As I shared in the introduction, I am a big fan of academics. I couldn’t wait to go to Bible college and seminary. I figured I would get “super-disciplined” by studying the Bible and the languages of Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Latin. I looked forward to examining the church fathers and diving into scholarly debates. It did give me a wonderful foundation for which I am very grateful.

I loved learning and still love learning, but it didn’t take long to

realize there was a pretty big gap between my head and my heart. The Christian life is not just about thinking deep thoughts or even thinking correctly. There is something deeper going on inside the heart that academics doesn't touch. Part of my discouragement with the Christian faith was that I knew I wouldn't find the answers I was looking for in more biblical study.

Behavior

When study didn't produce what I was looking for, I assumed I could find it in developing a life of discipline. I knew I needed a disciplined quiet time, a disciplined prayer life, and a focus on good behavior. If I could just do good things, surely I would become a good person.

But what I found was that I never seemed to measure up. Sometimes I was super disciplined, and sometimes I felt like I had no discipline at all. No matter how much I tried, I always seemed to fall short of developing the level of discipline and good behavior I thought a true Christian should have.

So, discipline felt like a fickle solution. The harder I worked at behaving well, the more it exposed the fact that something was broken inside that kept sabotaging my efforts.

Church Activity

One of the assumptions made by the folks who produced the study from Willow Creek was that church activity would lead to maturity. It turned out that it doesn't. You can be involved in a small group, volunteer in a social justice ministry, participate in evangelistic outreaches, and still find yourself stalled and dissatisfied as a Christian.

Personally, I started teaching Sunday School when I was fourteen and basically never stopped. I've been teaching somewhere, at some level, ever

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since. I have also been in dozens of small groups and launched, organized, and participated in numerous programs designed to help others. What I found was that sometimes it was great, and sometimes it just wore me out and left me drained and discouraged.

I realized later that when it was great, it was because I enjoyed being with the people who were in the project with me. The more joy there was relationally, the more transformative the experience turned out to be. But joy seemed like the exception rather than the rule. Too often, church activity just turned into a duty to discharge rather than a point of deep and energizing connection.

I could go on, but I think you get the idea. Traditional discipleship focuses on what Jesus called “the outside of the cup” (Matt. 23:25), but it generally misses the inside. In my case, traditional discipleship left me looking really good on the outside. My résumé was impressive. Churches loved having me around because I volunteered, had experience and credentials, was theologically sound, and served faithfully. The problem for me was that these things didn’t necessarily translate into a deeper connection with God. There was still a gap between what I got from traditional discipleship and what I knew I needed if I wanted a more vibrant walk with God.

ASSESSING THE PROBLEM

When I was in seminary, a visiting professor asked us, “If the church was a factory, what would its product be?” After a short discussion, we all agreed that the product would be disciples. The instructor spent the rest of the course trying to help us learn how to become disciple-making pastors.

It was good material as far as it went. However, most of the assumptions about what constituted good discipleship were built on the ABCs and getting people involved in evangelism. While that is all good stuff, it still misses something that touches on the deeper issues of the heart.

What I have learned since then was that there was a word missing

in our answer. The church doesn't just exist to make disciples. We also exist to bring those disciples to *maturity*. The goal of the discipleship process is to produce *mature* disciples. This aim is in keeping with Paul's vision to "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col. 1:28) and to see every Christian grow into maturity "with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Eph. 4:13 CSB).

I have a friend who is an engineer. He often gets paid to help companies improve the quality of their products. He has observed that if the church really were a factory, there is no way anyone would be satisfied with the quality of the product being produced. As my friend assessed the discipleship situation in the church, he concluded that most churches don't know how to describe what a mature disciple is, or they operate with faulty growth models. Thus, they are either aiming at the wrong target or using a flawed process for reaching that target, or both.

Spiritual maturity cannot be separated from emotional and relational maturity.

What does it mean, then, to be a mature disciple of Jesus? Let's start by looking at it in more detail.

Spiritual maturity cannot be separated from emotional and relational maturity.⁴ If we are looking for a measuring stick of how we know someone is mature, the fruit of the Spirit is a great place to start. Let's take a quick look at the first four. Notice how they are all related to emotional and relational skills:

- **Love**—That's about as relational as it gets.
- **Joy**—It is the anchor of emotional maturity. According to the latest neuroscience, joy determines our capacity to handle upsetting emotions.⁵
- **Peace**—Peace and joy combine to create the foundation of emotional capacity. Peace is a good description of being quieted from distressing emotions.

- **Patience**—It is core to relational maturity. One can define maturity as the ability to suffer well.⁶ The Greek word *makrothumia* for patience means “great suffering.”⁷

If we take this seriously, it means that any definition of spiritual maturity must also include emotional and relational maturity. Sadly, the church is littered with people who have gone through extensive training in traditional discipleship without growing in emotional or relational maturity.

Even countless pastors and Christian leaders have received excellent educations and have even gone through extensive discipleship training without becoming emotionally or relationally mature. They are often charismatic, talented, and visionary, but the people closest to them walk on eggshells, unsure of what will set them off next.

I don't mean to pick on pastors. I was a pastor, and I know there are lots of great people in ministry. But it makes the point. If you can reach the “pinnacle” of church leadership without actually developing maturity, is it reasonable to think our discipleship process will create maturity in others?

ASSESSING MATURITY

My friend, Jim Wilder, is a unique person who has an in-depth knowledge of Scripture and has an advanced understanding of neuroscience. Based on both Scripture and neuroscience, Jim has concluded that maturity is the ability to remain relational, act like yourself, and return to joy despite upsetting emotions. People who can do these things even when enduring hardship are truly mature. This model of maturity can be remembered with the word RARE:

- **Remain relational**
- **Act like yourself**
- **Return to joy**
- **Endure hardship well**⁸

The idea is that you can measure maturity by how much suffering it takes before someone melts down, shuts down, or blows up relationally. It takes only a little hardship for an immature individual to stop being relational and start acting like a different person. In the same way, it takes a lot to overwhelm a mature person to the point that you fear being around them.

As we've talked about, too many Christians lack emotional and relational maturity. It takes relatively little stress for them to snap. People around them operate out of fear because they are never sure which person they will get—the mature adult or the emotionally immature child.

But you can tell who the most mature person is in any group by who can handle the most emotional weight and still remain relational and act like themselves. Mature people also excel at returning to joy from upsetting emotions. They are exactly the sort of people you want around when emotions are high because they exert a calming influence on the whole group.

Think about it this way: If you are in distress, who do you want to talk to? Someone who will get overwhelmed by how you feel? Probably not. Someone who will try to fix you without really understanding you? I doubt it. You want someone who can hear your distress, still be happy to be with you, and help you recover your joy, don't you? That's maturity.

The Scriptures often talk about maturity in terms of human development. It speaks of spiritual infants, children, adults, parents, and elders. Using these categories can help us assess our own maturity. Let's take a closer look.

Infants

In 1 Corinthians 3:1–2, Paul addressed the Corinthian Christians as infants in the faith. He didn't mean they lacked knowledge. He meant they

Maturity is the ability to remain relational, act like yourself, and return to joy despite upsetting emotions.

lacked maturity. What he chastised them for was the immaturity that divided into factions in the name of being wise. They lacked emotional and relational maturity.

Infants cannot take care of themselves. They need someone else to do everything for them. In a spiritual sense, we are infants when we easily lose our ability to stay relational and act like ourselves and need someone else to help us recover, or we will get stuck in our distress for a long time.

It is possible to have a doctorate in ministry but be an infant emotionally and relationally. Just ask my wife. When holes in my maturity development get exposed, I can stop acting like myself and turn into a child or an infant. I don't do this as often as I used to, but when it happens, it is a clear sign that I have some growth issues that need to be addressed.

Children

Childhood is about learning the skills that we need to master to take care of our personal needs. Most children learn how to dress and feed themselves and care for themselves physically. And, when they become fully mature, they are self-sufficient. However, many do not get the same training when it comes to caring for their emotional needs or handling their relationships well. In this sense, spiritual children are good at making sure their own needs get met, but they are not good at making sure the needs of those around them are met.

People who are stuck at infant- or child-level maturity get angry easily, avoid difficult people and hard tasks, and generally find themselves struggling with some kind of addiction. Many spiritual children do their best to hide these shortcomings, so only the people closest to them see what is really going on.

A discipleship process that moves people from infant-level maturity to adult-level maturity needs to help people learn how Christians care for their hearts and recover from upsetting emotions. It should be a standard part of the discipleship process, and something we will devote a significant amount of attention to in the remainder of the book.

Adults

The focus of adults moves from taking care of only themselves to also focusing on the needs of their group or people. Paul put it this way, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Phil. 2:3–4 NIV). This is a good description of adult-level maturity.

Spiritual adults are emotionally stable and good with relationships. When a group of people are forming a committee in the church, one pastor I know often asks, “Who is the adult in the room?” He means, “Who will be in this meeting who has the ability to keep the relationships civil and the emotions from getting out of hand?”

Parents

Parents are those who have been practicing adult-level maturity for a few years and are ready to start training a new generation in the skills and habits of maturity. There was apparently a shortage of spiritual parents in Corinth. Paul wrote:

For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ. (1 Cor. 4:15–17)

The Corinthians lacked people who could model adult-level maturity, so Paul sent Timothy to be a spiritual parent and help them develop their own maturity and produce even more spiritual parents capable of mentoring others. Paul did not send Timothy because the Corinthians lacked good teachers and good information, but because they lacked models of adult maturity who could train others in the kind of spiritual maturity that produced emotional and relational skills.

Elders

An elder is not just an office in the church. Elders have raised their own children and are available to care for the community. After navigating the highs and lows of parenting their kids (so that the youngest of them has become an adult), a true elder is well-practiced not only in adult maturity but in helping others fill holes in their maturity development.

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It is significant that in a typical lifetime, most people spend nearly half their lives as elders. If I have my first child at age twenty and see my youngest reach adulthood around age forty-five, I will

spend the next forty-five years as an elder (if I live to be ninety).

There is a reason God wanted so many elders in this world. He knew we would need help navigating the hardships of a fallen world. There is a reason the apostles wanted elders in positions of authority in the church. To be an elder was to be recognized by the community as someone who had raised their family and demonstrated the kind of spiritual maturity that exhibits godly character even during hardship.

DISCIPLESHIP IS MATURITY DEVELOPMENT

Every church has people at various stages of maturity, and we need spiritual parents and elders to help guide infants and children. The discipleship process is one of maturity development that meets people where they are and helps them develop the skills and habits to move to the next stage of maturity.

Understanding that maturity is the goal of the discipleship process means that the holes inherent in traditional discipleship are unacceptable. We need a discipleship process that routinely moves people from one stage of maturity to the next. In this sense, the church is not so

much a factory as a family, and this process requires a growth model with a proven track record of producing mature Christians.

LOOKING AHEAD TO A GROWTH MODEL THAT WORKS

It was over thirty years ago that I felt the discouragement and sense of hopelessness as to whether Christianity really had the answers I needed. Since then, I have been on a long journey of recognizing the holes in my own maturity development and working through issues I didn't even know I had.

If the goal of the Christian faith is to learn to love God and others, it makes sense that our discipleship process should not simply be about academics, good behavior, and church activity. It should be anchored in a growth model that helps us become more loving people, who stay loving people even when life gets hard.

I am not perfect and do not have all the answers, but I am much farther down the path than I used to be. So, in the pages ahead, I will share with you a growth model that works. It's called heart-focused discipleship. It is less half-brained and more whole-brained, yet firmly rooted in the gospel. I didn't invent this model. Instead, it is a compilation of tools and perspectives that have changed lives for generations. I've just tried to make it easy to understand and simple to get started.