



Discipleship Deficit Found Among Churchgoers

The Wired Word for the Week of March 8, 2026

In the News

Lifeway Research recently studied discipleship among churchgoers in the United States. They discovered that if discipleship were a test, the average churchgoer would just barely get a passing grade. Lifeway asked dozens of questions related to Christian doctrine and practice, all connected to eight characteristics that are present in the lives of Christians who are growing in their faith.

What was the grade that churchgoers received? According to *The Roys Report*, "Churchgoers were given a score from zero to 100 overall for each of the eight characteristics of discipleship. The average total score is 68.1, with some factors topping near 80 while others languish in the 50s."

There is a clear need for improvement among American church members, and pastors know it. While 52% of pastors are satisfied with discipleship and spiritual formation in their churches, only 8% *strongly* agree. "Pastors know their congregations can follow Christ more closely, but they often don't know the specifics of what areas of people's lives don't align with what the Bible calls us to," said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway. "This research provides a national snapshot of these details."

The online survey of 2,130 Protestant churchgoers was conducted in March 2025, using a national panel. Respondents were screened to include those who identified as Protestant/nondenominational and attended religious services at least once a month.

So, what did Lifeway discover? The study used eight keys of spiritual maturity in its research: Bible engagement, obeying God and denying self, serving God and others, sharing Christ, exercising faith, seeking God, building relationships and living unashamed. The average churchgoer scored the highest in seeking God (78.5), followed by obeying God and denying self (75.1), serving God and others (73.1), exercising faith (71.6), Bible engagement (69.8), building relationships (64.0) and living unashamed (61.0). The lowest score was sharing Christ, where the average churchgoer got a 54.8.

One challenge for discipleship in American churches is that there is not a commonly understood set of definitions for terms such as disciple, discipleship and disciple-making. Since the core meaning of the word disciple is "learner," a Christian disciple can be understood as a follower or student of Jesus. By this definition, most churchgoers are doing well with a grade of 78.5 in seeking God. But if disciples are also to share the good news of Jesus and be disciple-makers, then people are failing with a score of 54.8 in sharing Christ.

Most churchgoers (54%) in the survey have been regularly attending church services for more than 20 years. The average churchgoer has been at their current congregation for 12 years, with a total of 30 years of church attendance overall.

The engagement of these churchgoers is really quite high. Lifeway found that in a typical month, the average churchgoer attends a worship service at their church more than four times. About three in ten, 29%, say they are

currently involved in ministries or projects that serve people in the community not affiliated with their church. A slightly higher number, 33%, have regular responsibilities at their church. Of those with church duties, 50% say that includes teaching or facilitating a Bible study, and 46% say it includes leading a ministry such as youth, worship or a food pantry.

On average, churchgoers say they give 9% of their annual income to their local church and 4% to other nonprofit charitable causes or organizations. Only 15% say they do not donate to their congregation.

The group surveyed by Lifeway seems to be more highly engaged in the life of the church than the average American today. According to *Ordinary Movement*, on any given weekend, only 30% of Americans now attend religious services (Gallup, 2021 - 2023), and weekly church attendance has declined from 42% to 30% in 20 years (Gallup, 2003 - 2023 comparison).

In 1990, 90% of Americans identified as Christian, while in 2023, only 63% did (Pew Research Center). In 1990, 8% of Americans identified as atheist, agnostic or religiously unaffiliated, while 29% do so today (Pew Research Center). Over 40 million Americans have disaffiliated from Christianity since the 1990s (Pew Research Center), and since 2020, members of Gen Z who never attend church rose from 28% to 37% (Barna Group, 2023).

In terms of discipleship, 93% of pastors say discipleship is a priority, but only 28% have a clear process for it (Barna Group). Among those who describe themselves as born-again, only one in 10 is actively discipling someone else (Barna Group), while 39% of Christians overall are not engaged in any form of discipleship (Barna Group).

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Study Shows Discipleship Deficit Exists Among U.S. Churchgoers. *The Roys Report*](#)

[Discipleship Deficit Exists Among U.S. Churchgoers. *Lifeway Research*](#)

[Church & Discipleship Statistics \(2026\). *Ordinary Movement*](#)

Applying the News Story

Discuss what it means to be a disciple, how you can be a better student and follower of Christ, and what you can do to share him with others, as an individual and a church member.

The Big Questions

1. How do you engage the Bible each week, individually and in community?
2. When have you been challenged to obey God and deny yourself? Describe the experience. What was the result?
3. What actions do you take to serve God and others? How do you build relationships in the church? Be specific.
4. When, if ever, have you shared Christ with another person? How did you do it? What was the outcome of this sharing?
5. What do you do to seek God, both inside and outside of church?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 10:17

Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but one who rejects a rebuke goes astray. (For context, read [Proverbs 10:11-32.](#))

The sayings in the book of Proverbs are attributed to the Israelite king Solomon, who has traditionally been linked to great wisdom. Chapter 10 begins a second collection of sayings, under the heading, "The proverbs of Solomon" (v. 1).

Many of the sayings are written in a form called "antithetical parallelism," in which one line carries a thought that is contrasted in the second line. A good example is, "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence" (v. 11). In verses 11 through 32, the importance of the mouth is stressed in numerous proverbs.

Since disciples are students who follow a teacher and learn from him or her, there are many proverbs that stress the importance of listening to wise speech: "On the lips of one who has understanding wisdom is found" (v. 13); "The tongue of the righteous is choice silver" (v. 20); "The lips of the righteous feed many" (v. 21); "The mouth of the righteous brings forth wisdom" (v. 31); and "The lips of the righteous know what is acceptable" (v. 32).

"Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life," says Solomon. This tells us that listening to the insightful speech of a good teacher is not only a way to become wiser, it is "the path to life." A disciple who follows a God-inspired teacher will be enriched in heart, body and mind, and will remain on the path of righteousness in this life and the next.

Questions: Among the characters in Scripture, who are your most influential teachers, and why? What biblical instructions are most important to you on the "path to life"? Why is wise speech so important in shaping a good life?

Mark 1:16-17

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. And Jesus said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people." (For context, read [Mark 1:14-20](#).)

The gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea. Jesus called for the two to follow him, and "immediately they left their nets and followed him" (v. 18). They left their nets and presumably their families as well. Although the Bible does not say anything about wives for these men, Mark tells us that Simon had a mother-in-law (v. 30). Where there is a mother-in-law, there is usually a wife.

Then Jesus saw James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They were also fishermen, sitting in their boat and mending their nets. Jesus called them and they left their father "in the boat with the hired men and followed him" (v. 20). This probably caused problems, since fishing was a family business and Zebedee could not have been happy to be left holding the nets.

Discipleship can be disruptive, since it involves leaving what we know and walking with Jesus into a new form of service to others. It may mean tutoring an at-risk child, teaching English as a second language, or swinging a hammer with Habitat for Humanity. Service brings us closer to Jesus, who said that he "came not to be served but to serve" (10:45).

A good disciple also leaves the familiar for the unfamiliar, seeking connections with people who do not share their race, religion or ideology. Disciples understand that Jesus did not begin his ministry by talking only with like-minded Galileans. Instead, he and his disciples immediately faced "a man with an unclean spirit" (1:23). Then Jesus "cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (v. 34). Instead of staying at home, Jesus said that he would "go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also" (v. 38). When disciples seek connections with others, acting as "fishers of people," they discover that the words of Jesus are true, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near" (v. 15).

Questions: What do you find to be the most disruptive about the decision to follow Jesus? When has Jesus led you into a new type of service to others, and what did you learn? When, if ever, have you sought a connection with a person of a different race, religion or ideology? What were the costs and the benefits of this relationship?

John 1:35-39

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. (For context, read [John 1:29-42](#).)

The gospel of John is full of invitations that can be used effectively by disciples who want to share Christ with others. In chapter 1, John the Baptist sees Jesus and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (v. 29). The phrase "Lamb of God" brings to mind the time when God provided Abraham with a sacrificial animal in place of his son Isaac (Genesis 22:8), and it makes us think of the lamb that was sacrificed as part of the Passover (Exodus 12:3). Here, at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus, John points us to the cross. He knows that Jesus is destined to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The next day, John is standing with two of his disciples. As he watches Jesus pass by, he exclaims, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" John has his own disciples, but it appears that he is not really interested in gathering disciples to himself. Instead, he wants to point people to Jesus and invite them to believe in him. This happens when he points two of his disciples to Jesus and

they immediately follow him. John's words about "the Lamb of God" are an effective invitation.

When Jesus turns and sees the two following, he says to them, "What are you looking for?" He offers an invitation, not a proclamation. They do not give an answer, but instead say, "Rabbi" -- the word used by Jews for their religious teachers -- "where are you staying?" More than anything else, they want to be in the presence of Jesus. At this point, Jesus does not give them a specific address, but he says, "Come and see." They respond by going to where he is staying and they remain "with him that day."

"Come and see" is an effective invitation, and it is one that we can use in the life of the church. When we invite people to join the worship and activities of our congregations, we lead them to a place where the risen Lord is alive and well, a place where they can come face to face with Jesus.

Questions: What does it mean to you that Jesus is "the Lamb of God"? If you think about what your neighbors might be looking for, what comes to mind? How can you invite them to "come and see" the risen Christ in the worship and activities of your congregation?

Ephesians 5:1-2

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (For context, read [Ephesians 4:31 - 5:2](#).)

Writing to the followers of Christ in Ephesus, a wealthy port city in western Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the apostle Paul urged them to abandon "all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice" (4:31), and instead to be "kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you" (v. 32). Paul was

making a strong contrast between the Gentiles' previous lifestyle and their new identity in Christ.

At the beginning of chapter 5, Paul encouraged them to imitate God "as beloved children." The metaphor of "beloved children" is based on the cultural expectation that children would imitate their parents. As imitators of their heavenly father, the Ephesians were to be kind, tenderhearted, and willing to forgive each other as "God in Christ" had forgiven them.

Questions: How are we, as disciples, to imitate God? What are the particular behaviors we are to practice? Why would such a lifestyle be attractive to those who do not know Christ?

For Further Discussion

1. TWW Team Member Mary Sells knows that weekly worship is the norm for hearing God's Word, but other gatherings can be helpful in equipping people for discipleship. Where else do you find spiritual food? In a world where the demands on pastors are great, how can volunteers provide leadership? What would help you to do a "deep dive" into Bible study and into the practices and teachings of your church? Be specific.

2. Commissioned by a private foundation, ["The Great Opportunity" is an independent report](#) estimating that over 40 million young people who were raised in Christian homes could walk away from a life with Jesus by 2050. How can your church help young people to engage or reengage with Christ? What are you willing to do personally, if anything?

3. According to the Barna Group, only 17% of Christians in the United States know what the Great Commission is and what it means. For the great majority of Americans who do not know what it is, see Matthew 28:19-20, in which Jesus says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and

teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." How is the Great Commission practiced in your church, if at all? What portion speaks to you? How can you respond?

4. In Mark, Jesus said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people" (1:17). In Acts, Paul and Silas said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (16:31). What difference is there, if any, between following Jesus and believing in Jesus? How are your actions and your faith connected in a life of discipleship? Which is more important to you, and why?

Responding to the News

Make an effort this week to engage the Bible more deeply. Try to put God first in your day-to-day life, even if it means denying yourself. Make an effort to serve God by serving others, and strengthen your relationships in the church. Look for an opportunity to invite a neighbor to "come and see" what the risen Jesus is doing in your community of faith.

Prayer

We seek you, Lord God, knowing that you offer us the path to life. Help us to follow where you are leading us, and inspire us to be faithful disciples of your Son Jesus Christ. Nourish us by life in the Christian community, so that we will be equipped to share Christ with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.