

In 1850 the London Missionary Society wrote to David Livingstone, in Central Africa, and asked, “Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you.” Livingstone wrote back, “If you have men who will come only because there is a good road, I don’t want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all.” Livingstone had taken over the Mission of Robert Moffat who after twenty years had gained a congregation of 43. In fact Livingstone only made one convert in his whole life.

Every ministry and every ministry leader in the history of the Christian faith has faced tough times. Usually theological colleges do not tell their students that, but if you are a Christian leader you need to know it and recognize that you may never get used to it. It seems so far removed from the picture of faith living that we expect, and yet it is reality. In any church endeavour there will always be times of encouragement and times of discouragement. In discouraging times, ministry leaders often feel compelled to do two things. The first is to shore up as much support as possible and the second is to try to determine who is truly committed to the continued advancement of the ministry.

Jesus Christ clearly did not read some of the latest books on church leadership. As chapter 6 of John closes, he seems determined to drive away as many followers as possible from his ministry. There is no mention here of a new ministry growth campaign. Contrast this passage with the opening of John 6. Then, the crowd is so large that Jesus asks where he can find enough food to feed everyone. His disciples cannot imagine where they would find the money to feed so many. Jesus then feeds the multitude with a boy’s lunch. This is hardly a textbook example for today’s church-growth experts, some of whom would likely recommend damage control and intensive strategies to shore up support. Jesus, however, gives the remaining disciples an opportunity to walk away: “ ‘You do not want to leave too, do you?’ Jesus asked the Twelve” (v. 67). This is more than an invitation to walk away. It is a call to commitment.

Today we often are reluctant to present the demands of Christ to would-be disciples because we fear putting them off Christianity and driving them away. That is not the way of Jesus in this passage. His words are difficult for many people in this crowd to understand and harder still to follow. He says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him” (v. 56). Then he seems almost critical of their proud heritage: “Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever.” The Jewish religious leaders have taught them that cannibalism — eating human flesh and drinking human blood, runs counter to their religious teachings, and remind them time and again that theirs is a heritage that had experienced God’s provision. They fail to see past the words and realize that Jesus is using a metaphor that speaks to the real union that must take place if they would be his disciples.

“This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (v. 60). Jesus knows that many people in the crowd are there for what he can give them. He makes claims for himself that will force them to decide whom they will follow. Would it be the teachings and traditions of their old religious teachers or Christ’s message that offends more than a few? The moment of decision has come and when his talk gets tough, the people drift away.

Christ’s call to commitment is a double-edged demand. First, it sets forth clearly his life mission and his expectation for those who would go further with him. Second, it weeds out shallowness of commitment from among them. As a result, thousands drop out. Now, Jesus

turns to the twelve and asks his pointed question: “You do not want to leave too, do you?” It is a make-up-your-mind moment of a lifetime!

We live in a make-up-your-mind generation. While there is evidence of church growth in many areas of the world — such as parts of Asia Africa and Latin America — the fact is that the mainline churches across Australia are being forced to recognize a decline in membership and mission outreach, so much so that many sociologists are calling us a post-Christian generation. Many people have walked away. Why is that? These verses may help us to see some reasons.

Despite the fact that Jesus performs a miracle with a boy’s meal, it is not long before suspicion, doubt, and open hostility set in against him. The majority of the people are not ready to commit to his unique claims and uncompromising truths about the way of salvation (v. 29), about his ultimate identity (v. 32), about his superiority to Moses (vv. 35, 49-58), or about salvation coming from God alone (vv. 35-65). Witnessing a miracle or two is one thing unreserved commitment to the miracle worker can be another. When truth comes to us, we finally have but two ways to respond to it: The people in this crowd reject Christ’s truth for many reasons:

Some oppose it because they oppose him. He is new. He is different and people often do not like change. Many Jewish leaders disagree with Jesus’ teaching from the beginning. For one thing, he is not a local fellow. He is from Nazareth and they have a saying, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (see John 1:46).

The Jews began to grumble about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” They said, “Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven’?” — John 6:41-42 Rejected by his own people!

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. — John 1:10-11

Later, the same people argue, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (John 6:52). They reject both him and his teaching.

There are others among the crowd who seem blind to truth no matter how obvious it is. They see and benefit from Christ’s miracle with the loaves and fishes, and they marvel as to how Jesus crosses the lake (see John 6:5-13, 22-25). Yet, how soon they forgot! Call it memory myopia, if you like, for that is what it is.

Yet, others want the miracles without a master! Constantly on the outlook for some new emotional high, these follow only for the excitement of the moment. Their expectations are all heaped on Jesus, on the last “big thing” he did or their expectation of what should come next. They come looking for a king who would lead them out of Rome’s bondage in ways that they imagine it ought to happen. They give no thought about what they themselves might do to make that come to pass.

Look around you. See what is happening in some areas of the church. There are those who leave the church because they say, “I don’t get anything out of it ... that church did not feed me ... it didn’t meet my needs.” For them, church is all about what it does for them, with little or no thought given to what they might do for the church or its master. They run from fellowship to fellowship looking for the most acceptable music or the newest gospel gimmick. Let us be honest: entertainment is high on their list, not devotion to the Lord of the universe.

The truth is not always easy to accept nor readily apparent. We see this pattern in other places, too. In John 3, Nicodemus — a religious scholar no less — confused spiritual truth with

gynecological medicine. In John 4, the woman at the well first believed Jesus was some kind of water quality expert. In John 5, the man by the pool of Bethesda believed at first that he had been the beneficiary of some kind of welfare program. There was nothing spiritual about his understanding of his healing until Jesus told him, “Stop sinning or something worse may happen to you” (John 5:14). The reality of the Gospel is that the truth makes demands of us and the gospel of Jesus has never been easy to follow nor popular among the majority.

A wise adage of our culture is never to burn your boats or bridges. And I must admit I have offered this advice to many contemplating a significant move. However in our Christian faith it is exactly what we ought to do!

The call to follow Jesus is a call to burn all our other bridges and boats. Peter can see what the crowd cannot see that day. He realizes that Jesus Christ is God’s eternal bread come down from heaven and that he has the words of eternal life. As a result, Peter becomes a partaker of two great possessions that I offer to you today, in Christ’s name. They are faith — the inward conviction that Jesus Christ is who he claims to be and will do everything he promises to do. The faith I offer you is not mere emotion. It is, rather, action. I invite you to choose to see it as an acronym, F-A-I-T-H. F-A-I-T-H stands for Forsaking-All-I-Trust-Him X2. Jesus says, “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). When we receive Christ by faith, we then receive the second great possession of those who come to Christ completely. It is the possession of Christian experience. It is evidenced over time in new desires, new goals, new direction for your life, a full heart, and in the first-hand experience of seeing Christ’s work in and through us and of our neighbour’s. The Apostle Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Peter knows that his life is changed for the better in walking with Jesus. This in itself is enough for this moment when he has an opportunity to walk away. Certainly, there would later come a time when Peter would deny the Lord and go his own way for a while, but the reality is that even then he could never really walk away. Once we have tasted the light of Christ’s glory and have sensed the touch of the Lord’s hand on our lives, and once we have known the best that he has to offer us, we will never again be satisfied with second best. Peter knows that and asks, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” We may wander away for a time, but like the prodigal son we will come to our senses and remember that life in the Father’s house is life worth living, and we will come home. The call of this day is for each of us to examine our own commitment to Jesus. Do we follow him for what we imagine he can do for us or for who he is and what we can do for his glory?