

Forming Disciples Who Make Disciples

Matthew 28:18-20

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Please open your Bible to Matthew 28. This is a passage which tells us how Jesus plans to conquer the world by forming disciples who make disciples. His battle plan is that simple. He intends for all the universe to come under His Lordship. Every tongue will confess He is Lord and every knee will bow to Him.

What is a disciple? A disciple is a learner who brings himself or herself under the apprenticeship—the teaching and training—of a master. Jesus is the Master Teacher. C.S. Lewis said:

The church exists for nothing else but to draw men and women into Christ and to make them little Christs—to see them conformed to the image of Jesus. If the church is not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions and sermons are simply a waste of time.

The church exists to form disciples—followers of Jesus—who make disciples of others.

We have to realize that everything in the Christian life and in the church must be seen through this discipleship lens. It's more than a program. Discipleship is more than being mentored by someone or going to classes where you learn more information. It is more than attending a small group or care group. All of those things are part of it but it can't be seen as just a program or a little slice of the church's life.

Forming disciples who make disciples cannot be reduced to an event, class or something you check off a list. It must be what our church is all about. Everything we do—our worship, service, care groups, teaching, training, mission to the community and ministries to youth—must be seen through this lens. We are seeking to draw people into Christ in order that they might become like Christ.

I want to refresh our vision by looking at the last words Jesus spoke after His resurrection before He went back to heaven. These words—known as 'The Great Commission'—are well known but so packed with power. It is very important for a church to recalibrate its vision

around these words. With this commission, Jesus sent forth a very small band of disciples who would turn the world upside down in their generation.

Let's read Matthew 28:16-20:

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I want to ask four familiar questions of this familiar text:

1. Who?
2. What?
3. How?
4. Why?

Who is being commissioned and who is giving the commission?

We see in verse 17 that the people being commissioned were not spiritual giants. They worshipped Jesus and doubted Him at the same time. They were ordinary people—like us—believing and hesitating at the same time. They were devoted to Jesus but prone to failure also.

That is good news. He doesn't only commission spiritual giants, He commissions men and women like you and me—those who want to live for Him, love Him and worship Him but are full of hesitation and doubts. He can use people like us!

Who is giving the commission? It is Jesus Who begins in Matthew 28:18 by saying, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*" The One Who has commissioned us has absolute, incontestable authority over all on earth and in heaven. Jesus is Lord of the universe. There is nothing in heaven or on earth outside His power or which He does not have the right to command to do according to His good pleasure. He is one with the Author of the universe—God the Father, the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth. Because He is one with the Author, He has all authority to command everything which exists in this planet and the whole universe. He has authority over politics, governments, armies, industry and business. He has authority over your future, dreams, ambitions, conduct and affections. Jesus is Lord of all. He is the One Who commissions us to go and make disciples.

What have we been commissioned to do?

Notice the verbs in Matthew 28:19-20. “*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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” In English, we hear four very important verbs in that commission. However, in reality there is one main verb—one imperative, finite command. The other three are all subsidiary—telling us how to do this one main thing which He is commanding.

The main verb is “*make disciples.*” That’s the central command which Jesus—Who has all authority in heaven and on earth—leaves His disciples before He descends to the right hand of the Father. This is the one thing He wants us to know is our mission. Not just, “evangelize” or “tell people about me” or “make converts” or “try to grow your church.” All these things are important aspects of the mission but the one thing He wants us to do is “*make disciples.*” In other words, “Draw men into Me so they become conformed into My likeness. You who worship and doubt, who believe and hesitate, who feel your own weakness and think of yourselves as small, go make disciples.”

I can’t do that in my own strength. Only the Holy Spirit can form people into the image of Christ. But by giving this command, Jesus is telling us it is the Holy Spirit’s intention to work through people like you and me to make disciples of all the world. He can do that through us because He has authority over all the nations.

I love that Jesus says, “*...make disciples of all nations...*” That means Jesus is not embarrassed to say, “I have the right to command Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Animists and atheists to follow and worship Me.” Jesus is not a pluralist or ashamed of the exclusive claims of the gospel. He has the right to command all people everywhere to worship Him as Lord because He is Lord of all. He is the only Lord of all—the One Who has all authority in heaven and on earth.

See what Revelation 15:3-4 says about our Lord Jesus:

*“Great and amazing are your deeds,
O Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways,
O King of the nations!
Who will not fear, O Lord,
and glorify your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.”*

That's true of our Lord Jesus Christ. I look forward to the day when we will be gathered before the throne of the Lamb—worshipping Him with people from every tribe, language and nation. What a glorious thing it will be to worship Him with a vast representation of all humanity, ethnicities and nations honoring Him as Lord.

In order to see the fulfillment of this vision in our generation, we must never apologize for calling all people everywhere to repent, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and follow Him. We are not doing this on our own authority but on the authority of Him Who says, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Matthew 28:18). We would not apologize if we were members of the U.S. Armed Forces obeying the orders of our commander in chief. How much less should we be ashamed to declare with joyful boldness the sin-erasing, guilt-freeing, hell-delivering, life-giving message of the Lord Jesus Christ? He has all authority in heaven and on earth and in that authority His commission to us is to make disciples of all nations.

How are we to carry out this commission?

There are three subsidiary verbs which describe the how—the strategy of how we are to go and make disciples and fulfill the great commission.

1. Going

We must go out into the world, not wait for the world to come to us. We must realize every aspect of our lives can become loaded with significance for the fulfillment of the great commission. We all have involvement in our spheres of family, workplace, church and community. In every one of those spheres is an opportunity for disciple-making. We are to go out to people, not stay within these walls and expect everyone to come to us. Every dimension of life is under His Lordship. We can leverage all of our callings in business, music, education, home and school for disciple-making opportunities.

2. Baptizing

"...*baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 28:19). Isn't it interesting that He says, "...*in the name of...*"? He doesn't say, "In the names of..." Rather, He says, "...*the name [singular] of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*" Three in One, One in Three is a strong Trinitarian teaching found here. Jesus believes in the Trinity. To be baptized in the name of someone means

to pass into the possession of that person—a mark of ownership. It is God placing His mark on your life and saying, “You belong to Me. You belong to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Someone has said, “It is a sign that the baptized person is under new management.” Those who are baptized are saying, “I belong to the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. I am under new management and pledge my allegiance to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Have you ever thought, “Baptism is not that big of a deal”? Maybe you’ve been following the Lord for 10 or 15 years and have never been baptized. You might think, “Why do that now?” Jesus gives this as one of His final commands and issues it with all authority in heaven and on earth. He is saying, “It’s a big deal to publicly proclaim you belong to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” This is not something that can just be disregarded. People around the world are dying or being persecuted because they are publicly identifying with the Lord Jesus Christ through baptism. It means a lot in some countries where there is a great cost to following Jesus. If you are a believer in Jesus and have not been publicly baptized, consider the authority of the One Who makes this command.

3. Teaching

“...[T]eaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (verse 20). That is an absolutely comprehensive and unbelievably authoritative statement. “...[T]eaching them to observe all that [all things and as much as] I have commanded you.” We are to teach all that Jesus says we are to teach and we are to obey all His commands, not just the easy ones. He is Lord of all and has the right to command our obedience. His commandments are not optional.

Fulfilling this great commission and making disciples is not only about learning content. Jesus doesn’t simply say, “Teach them all that I have commanded you.” It’s not enough to just give the teaching. He says, “...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (verse 20). “Teach them to obey—to put it into practice and work it into every fabric of their lives.” That is what the great commission and making disciples involves. It is being formed into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are teaching and training people to become followers of Him.

There are two implications of this:

1. We cannot make disciples of Jesus unless we are disciples of Him ourselves. We can only bring people as far as He has brought us. If I'm going to be a disciple-maker, I have to continually be formed into a more mature disciple myself. I have to keep learning and following Him so I can help others learn and follow Him. I can never plateau and be satisfied with where I am.

Martin Luther said:

In holy and divine matters, one must first hear rather than see, first believe rather than understand, first be grasped rather than grasp, first be captured rather than capture, first learn rather than teach, first be a disciple rather than a teacher and master of his own. We have an ear so that we may submit to others and eyes that we may take care of others. Therefore, whoever in the church wants to become an eye and a leader and master of others, let him become an ear and a disciple first. This first.

2. We are not following Jesus unless we are actively training or preparing to train others to follow Him also. You can't follow Him Who says, "Go and make disciples" if you are content to simply be a disciple and not make disciples. It can't be. In order to follow Him, we have to become disciple-makers.

Sometimes we think of Sunday School as somewhere to sit, listen to good teaching, then go off and forget about what we heard. We don't want to think that way. We want to form disciples who are intentionally seeking to make disciples of others. I think there are four main pillars of disciple-making:

- Doctrine—what we believe
- Character—how we live
- Community—how we relate to one another inside and outside the body
- Mission

Jesus gave us the great commission. He is not going to conquer the world through swords, bullets, bombs, hijacked airplanes or biological weapons. Jesus—Who is Lord of all—plans to conquer the world one by one as Christians reproduce

themselves by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is exciting to be part of this great plan of the sovereign Lord of the nations.

Sometimes I feel very small and powerless. We might look at New Covenant Bible Church and think, “We are just one, medium-sized church in a vast sea of humanity. What difference can we make?” The problem with that way of thinking is unbelief. We are not believing Who He is and what He says He wants to do through us.

Jesus looked at a small group of 11 disciples—some of whom were hesitating and doubting—and said, “I have all authority in heaven and earth. I’m going to work through you. Go, make disciples of all nations.” They believed Him, were filled with His Holy Spirit and started doing it. The church has been growing throughout the world for 2,000 years because Christians believe in the power of the Holy Spirit at work in them to form disciples who make disciples.

I am not following Jesus unless I am actively seeking to influence others to follow Him as well. It’s that simple. Philip Graham Ryken, President of Wheaton College, writes, “Our own discipleship is not complete until we become disciple-makers.” Don’t say, “That’s for other Christians or for those who are paid to do it.” It is for you and me.

You don’t have to go overseas to do it. God has given you gifts and placed you in certain spheres which are all laden with opportunity for the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Don’t think, “I’ll do that next year.” Right now there is someone in your life whom Jesus is preparing you to disciple.

How good it would be for each newly baptized believer to have one or two Christians surrounding them, seeking to help them learn more of what Jesus has commanded, helping them see more of God’s will in the Bible and of God’s purposes for them, praying with them and training them to minister. I think of those in my life who disciplined me and continue to disciple me. Most of them didn’t call me and say, “I want to disciple you.” They just came alongside me and started doing it.

How did I learn to pray? My Grandma Nana Hazel brought me to prayer meetings and took me out for ice cream sundaes afterwards. She taught me to pray. She made me get down on my knees next to her, began pouring out her heart to God and taught me to do the same.

Who taught me first to read the Bible? It was my youth pastor in Junior High—Pastor Dan Remus. He picked us up around six in the morning, opened the Bible and taught us how to start reading it. He would say, “Now, take your Bible to school with you, carry it on top of your books and tell others about Jesus.”

Who taught me how to witness and tell others about Jesus? It was a man named John Klein. He is now planting a church in Madison, Wisconsin. He took me to Regency Mall in Racine, Wisconsin when I was in Junior High and told me to go tell others about Jesus. That was my first experience of persecution. Someone took out his leather glove and slapped me on one side of the face. I was so shocked he slapped me on the other side as well. That was a good opportunity to begin to taste what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

How did I learn to give sacrificially? I watched my mom and dad model it for me.

How did I learn to love, lead, preach and shepherd Christ's flock? I learned it from people like John Sale and Mike Bullmore taking me under their wing, as well as from the example of our elders as they have come alongside me.

It's very simple, really. Open your eyes, be intentional and realize, "Whatever Jesus Christ has done in my life and whatever He has taught me, He intends me to pour myself into the lives of others. He has not given me one thing which He intends for me to keep to myself."

Why should we be confident in the success of this commission?

We can be confident because of what Jesus says in Matthew 28:20: "*And behold [take notice because something very important is going to be said], I am with you always, [even] to the end of the age.*" "I am Immanuel—God with you—every step of the way and to the very end of it all." Matthew's Gospel begins with the birth of Immanuel and ends with the promise that Immanuel will be with us personally, powerfully and perpetually as we seek to fulfill the Great Commission. He has all authority to command all nations to obey all He has commanded. He is with us always, even to the end of the age. At the end of history when the last battle has been fought and won, Jesus Christ will be standing—triumphant—and all His enemies will be crushed beneath His feet. He is the Victor and what a joy it is to be one of His followers!

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we praise You for making our Lord Jesus the Savior and Lord of all. We thank You for allowing us to belong to Him. We observe Your work of grace in the lives of those who are following Jesus, entering the waters of baptism and receiving Your mark of ownership upon their lives. I pray that every follower would listen, receive and delight in Your plan to make us disciple-makers of others. I pray You would be with us with Your grace and power as we seek to prepare others to be disciple-makers. I pray every training opportunity would be infused with Your Spirit's power to transform our vision, make us more active, hopeful and loving as we go into this world and seek to make disciples of others. I pray You would build Your church in such

a way that we would fade into the background and Your Son—Who has all authority and power—would be front and center in His blazing glory and splendor. Lord Jesus, be seen in Your church as sovereign Lord of all. You must increase; we must decrease. Get glory for Yourself through our lives as we lay them down. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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