

Becoming a Disciple-Making Church

Matthew 28:16-20 Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. ¹⁷ When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

The last words of people are often words full of meaning and power. The person dying or leaving knows he won't again see the person or people he's talking to, so he doesn't waste words. He strips away inconsequential matters, trivialities, and even niceties, and says what is most important for his hearers.

Some of the last words of Jesus are recorded here, and in Acts 1:8, and Mark 16:15. Interestingly, they all amount to the same thing: Make disciples of Jesus Christ. Make followers of Jesus. Make worshippers, who love God with all their heart, soul and mind.

The church would do well to always come back to these last words of Jesus. He told us what the greatest command is – to love God. And the way to get to that command is to make disciples of Himself. Every church is to be a disciple-making church. To the degree that we make disciples is the degree to which we are sticking to the original blueprint.

This command comes with authority and with comfort. The authority is seen where Jesus says, 'All authority in heaven and earth is given to me'. The comfort is seen in His words 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age'. Jesus sandwiches the commands between two things about Himself. He is the Sovereign King, who commands and demands that men repent and come to Him, and He is the Shepherd, whose yoke is easy and His burden is light.

You could have just the command, which might seem intimidating, like the general saying – , I am the general, and your orders are to go out to the front lines of the battle and bring me back some disciples. No, instead it is, go, because I'm coming with you. You're not just doing this **for** Me, Jesus says, you're doing this **with** Me.

We might doubt that we have the right to tell people of all nations and other religions that they must become disciples of Jesus Christ and we might want to draw back. So Jesus says, you have the right to do this, even when the world tells you you don't. Jesus says, I have all authority, and I'm telling you, this is what you are to do.

So any church which aims at discipleship finds itself right in the middle of Jesus' authority and Jesus' comfort. Jesus is effectively saying, if you are disciple-making, you are doing my will, and I will enable you and strengthen you and bless you.

So with that knowledge, we come then to the means by which we make disciples. There is one central command here, 'make disciples of all nations', but it is helped by three words, go, baptizing and teaching. Those three words help us to understand what our roles are as disciple-makers. We'll call those three stages fetching the disciples, fastening the disciples, and forming the disciples. Let's begin with the first one.

I. Fetching the Disciples

Jesus commands His followers to go and make disciples. You'll notice, He says 'go' and not 'wait'. When we think about this matter of going, we must realise it is our job to go and find and fetch those who will believe in Christ. Most of them will not come to church by themselves. They will not gravitate towards a place of worship because they do not want to worship God, until they are saved. What we do on a Sunday morning is not evangelism. What we do on a Sunday morning is worship. Worship is for those who are in a living relationship with the living God. We do not tailor-make our services to become interesting and attractive to unbelievers. To the degree that we do that, we'll make them repulsive and distasteful to true believers. Sunday morning is a family gathering. The start of discipleship is to fetch those who are outside.

But I use the word 'fetch' because it carries a biblical idea about evangelism. When you think of fetching someone, you usually think of collecting someone who is waiting for you. Well, do you know that that is exactly how the Bible views evangelism?

Acts 18:9-10 Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; ¹⁰ "for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city."

Paul has hardly begun to witness to anyone in Corinth, but God says He has many people in this city? How is that possible? They were people whom God had chosen to open their hearts.

Acts 13:48 ⁴⁸ ¶ Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

That process of fetching the person is not merely to invite them to church. That's a good thing, and perhaps the Lord will save them when they are exposed to truth on Sunday morning. But quite often, they will walk out a little bewildered, confused and feeling rather awkward. Which is exactly as it should be until they are born-again believers.

Therefore, your and my responsibility is not merely to invite them to church, but to fetch them out of unbelief and darkness and into faith and belief in Jesus Christ. My role is to find ways to bring them the good news that Jesus Christ the Son of God died in their place to save them from the wrath of God for their sin and rebellion, and that if they will repent and look to Jesus as Lord and Saviour, he will forgive them and grant them a new heart.

Don't wait for unbelievers to come to church. You may as well wait for fish to walk to the fish market. You've got to go to where the fish are, and fish. When the church tries to make itself into a big aquarium, that is when there are problems. Go where the fish are, and cast in your line.

So how do we do that?

This word translated 'go' is a present participle, which would literally be translated as 'going', literally, going, make disciples. That can have two shades of meaning to it. The first would sound like this: "as you are going, make disciple". This is what we might call **incidental evangelism**. "As you are going", make disciples. In other words, Jesus says to the apostles, as you are fishing, and tent-making and walking to the market, and trading and going to dinner at friend's houses, make disciples. As you walk about, as you live life, as you go, make disciples.

Jesus is saying that disciple-making is not something you switch on, and switch off. You are always to be in disciple-making mode. As you go, you are to be thinking, what if this person became a disciple of Jesus Christ? How different would he be? How different would she be? And you are to reject that thought which says, he is a hopeless cases. He will never be interested in the gospel. He will never be interested in the things of God.

You are to be thinking, how could I introduce them to Christ? Might it simply be my example today? Might it be an act of kindness? Might it be returning good for evil? Might it be leaving someone something to read? Might it be approaching the topic of religion with them? Might it be simply leaving a pebble in the shoe for them to think about? Might it be planting a seed which someone else will reap? This is the call. Everywhere, at all times, in all situations, think of the Great Commission; think in the direction of making everyone a disciple.

As you are going. As you eat breakfast with the children. As you work with your colleagues. As you email and phone. As you shop. As you go to events. As you spend your leisure time. As you are going, recognise, all people need to become Christians. How can I be used in that capacity?

There's a second shade of meaning to this word 'going'. It would sound like this "Going out , make disciples." This would be **deliberate evangelism**. If incidental evangelism is what you do as you live your life, deliberate evangelism is a targeted, focused effort. Deliberate evangelism is when you are a soul hunter. There is someone in your life that God has given you special proximity to, special access to, or maybe simply, a special burden for. And so you set about finding ways and means of sharing the gospel with them, and showing them the gospel with your life. You strategise, you think, you come up with ways to interact with this person, and to expose them to biblical truth about their need for Jesus Christ.

Think about how Jesus did this with the Samaritan woman. He deliberately went to the well, where she would be. He sent the disciples away, so she would not be intimidated. He asked for a drink, which brought up the topic of water, which He swung to the matter of living water. He answered her religious objections, and turned the conversation back to her need of forgiveness from sin.

Deliberate evangelism includes making specific times to go and share the gospel. Perhaps to distribute literature in your area. Perhaps to find an avenue for open air preaching.

If you have an army of Christians who are thinking like missionaries with everyone they meet, finding ways to show them Christ, or to speak about Christ, God is going to bless His Word, and people are going to call on the name of the Lord.

Romans 10:17 ¹⁷ So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

II. Fastening the Disciples

The next thing which we are told to be doing is 'baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit'. Now what exactly did Jesus mean by that? Well, what does it mean for someone to be baptised?

Let's look at a Scripture or two:

Romans 6:1-5 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? ² Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ³ Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? ⁴ Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ⁵ ¶ For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,

1 Corinthians 10:1-2 1 Corinthians 10:1 ¶ Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, ² all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,

Baptism - full identification with. Baptism is the sign of full union. Baptism is the outward symbol of discipleship. Baptism makes visible something invisible. Your faith in Christ is internal and invisible. The Spirit's regenerating work is invisible. Baptism makes those invisible events into a visible, public event where the invisible act is commemorated, and replayed. Baptism makes public something that happened privately and invisibly.

If baptism is making something that is invisible visible, and if it is making something private into something public, it also means that baptism is the means God uses for God's people to identify themselves with one another. Baptism is a church ordinance. Baptism is what a local assembly of believers, operating according to New Testament rules, does to verify that someone is truly a disciple of Jesus Christ and therefore qualified to join that church.

Acts 2:41-42 Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. ⁴² And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Jesus is saying that when you have gone out and have shared the gospel and some have professed faith in Jesus Christ, you do not leave them there, like spiritual orphans, wondering if their invisible, private experience was a true one. You follow-up with them. You invite them to the local church where they can be nourished, cared for, admonished, and grow. But when they come to the people of God, and they know and sense that these people are my people, and their Father is my Father, the natural step is the step of baptism. I want these people to know and see that I am a disciple of Christ. I too have been brought into the death and resurrection of Jesus. I too have been cleansed, I too have a new life. I identify with Christ and with His body.

While baptism doesn't make you a member of a church, it signifies your desire to identify with the people of God. And when a church wants to structure that identification, so that it isn't a loose, porous, slippery thing, it uses the concept of membership. It says, OK, let's organize this thing. Let's make it clear, not just at the beginning, but as we go along, who is truly identified with this body, and who is not.

Now what we can tell from Jesus' words is that He wanted more than just initial conversion. He wanted us to do more than to just hold evangelistic crusades and leave town. He wanted us to fasten those disciples to a caring, nourishing, protecting local church. He wanted something more than a kind of friendly association, where people with similar interests happen to hold a meeting once a week to encourage everyone's private religion. Jesus wanted disciples to be identified with and joined to a local assembly of believers with pastors and deacons, with baptism and the Lord's Supper, with corporate worship, with fellowship with discipleship.

A disciple-making church is made up of people who together are thoroughly convinced that the local church is God's means in this age for the discipleship of Christians. And because they are convinced that the focus of God's program for this age is the church, they are eager to see those who profess Christ to enter into Body life with a real, tangible, local church.

That's where many folks are not convinced. They agree that people ought to be discipled, but they have imbibed more from the wider Christian world than they have from the New Testament. So they think that discipleship will happen through para-church ministries like Christian radio and television, mp3 sermons, good books, subscribing to a particular ministry, cell-groups and informal Bible studies. Granted, these are avenues that, if the Word is rightly divided, will be used to help grow the Christian but if you read the New Testament, you will find that the means God has ordained Himself, and the means He will continue to bless and focus on is the local church, with its

God-ordained leadership, structure, worship and fellowship. If you're not certain of that, ask yourself some questions. To whom does Paul write His letters to? Answer: To local churches at Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Colossae, The province of Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, and the other four he writes to pastors or leaders of local churches. When Paul encourages spiritual growth, how often does that come as a plural command – you all? Most times.

And think of your own life. Where did most of your spiritual growth and maturity occur? Did it not happen, like mine, in the local church? Conversely, what has been your state when outside a local church.

You see, we do not have to always have all the reasons why a particular thing is God's focus or why it will work as well as it does. God knows it will. He knows us better than we know ourselves. Therefore, we must always yield to His wisdom.

A disciple-making church is a church strongly persuaded that the local church is the focal point of discipleship in this age. If we're not convinced of that, we'll probably evangelise here and there, and then leave people to their own devices. But if we are persuaded of that, we'll be inviting those who can to our local church, or we'll be referring them to other sound local churches.

Disciples are first fetched out of the world with the gospel. They are then fastened to a local church through baptism and membership. Then comes the third stage.

III. Forming the Disciples

The third thing which Jesus says we are to be doing is teaching these disciples everything that He commanded. Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets – all the Old Testament - as well as teaching new commandments as the Son of God. And since Jesus Himself said that the apostles would be led into all truth after His departure, we can conclude that what the apostles wrote, which is the New Testament, is part of what all the disciples are to be taught. Old and New Testaments, the authoritative Scripture, is to be taught to disciples. All of it. The whole counsel of God is to be the diet of disciples.

And the goal is not merely to teach them, but to teach them to observe all these things. That is, the goal is to train people to think and act like Christ. Their entire characters are to be transformed.

We teach what we must believe, what we must practise and what we must love. So how do we teach people the Christian life? Three ways. Three ways we form disciples:

You teach by instruction.

The first and most obvious way we teach is by imparting knowledge. We instruct. We take what God says and we teach it.

The central way that this happens is through the public preaching of the Word of God. In a post-modern era, preaching is unpopular. Preaching is dictatorial, top-down, controlling, a monologue, an ineffective way of learning. But God ordained it. Before His Word is discussed or shared, it is to be preached. If we ever neglect the primary place of preaching, our discipleship will fall like a rock. The discipleship within a church will seldom exceed in quality the preaching in the chat church. God knows what He's doing when he says,

1 Timothy 4:13 Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

2 Timothy 4:2 ² Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all

long suffering and teaching.

Secondary ways in which this happens is various small-groups, where the Word of God is taught. Sunday school groups, Wednesday evening Bible studies, Mom ' Tots', or other times when believers gather.

Another way is when believers gather one-on-one, or have each other over to study the Scriptures together.

Romans 15:14 Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.

Now, I'm sure we all know this, but the only way a church has integrity is when our times of individual and small-group discipleship are in harmony with what is preached or counselled pastorally. If we teach or counsel the opposite, we will have several churches under one roof. We will create confusion and factions.

You teach by example.

1 Corinthians 11:1 1 Corinthians 11:1 ¶ Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.

People learn by observing you. They observe how you train your children. They observe how you handle adversity. They observe how you respond to suffering. They observe how you spend your time and your money. They observe how you pray. They observe how you interpret Scripture. They observe what you watch and listen to. They observe how you drive. They observe how you speak about authority. They observe how you respond to authority. They observe how you give.

So much of the Christian life is caught. In fact, your example is often the living application of what you teach and the wrong example colours the whole picture wrong. The right example connects all the dots properly. But to teach by example you have to get involved in people's lives. You have to interact with them. You have to bring them along.

You teach by involvement.

People learn not only by hearing and watching, they learn by doing. People learn to become like Christ as they are given more responsibility. When they are asked to serve in various ways, when they are asked to put things into practice, people learn. It might be learning to phone others to encourage them. It might be learning to share the gospel with others. It might be learning to find ways to share Scriptures with other believers. It might be taking up some role of service when we meet on Sundays. But the further along you go, the more responsibility you need to be taking. That's a natural result of growth. As your children grow, you slowly but surely place more on them. You involve them more. And forming someone in the Christian life is also a matter of giving them spiritual responsibilities, and then supervising them, following up. Seeing how they do, and offering correction and encouragement.

Now, this might seem like a lot to remember, but it is a very natural thing. People who are not yet in the greenhouse of discipleship, need to be fetched with the gospel, either as you are going, or in a deliberate way.

Once they profess faith in Christ, they need to go public with that profession and identify with His people in a local church. You need to encourage them to commit to a local body of believers where they can be fed, nourished and built up. And then they need to be formed. They need to be taught all

that there is to the Christian life. You teach them that by instruction on Sunday and in other ways. You teach them by your example, because you are with them, spending time with them, inviting them over. And then, you teach them by letting them stretch and use their spiritual muscles, by giving them tasks and responsibilities.

A disciple-making church never switches out of discipleship mode. It is always asking the question, how can this person become a Christian, or how can this person become a better Christian? We never switch out of that mode, because as far as we are concerned, there can never be enough people who come to know Christ. There can never be enough of making Him known. The job is not done, until He comes to fetch us.

Fetching: Commit to thinking about evangelism *as you are going*.

Who is there in your life that you are deliberately praying for and working with to see them fully exposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Fastening: Are you thoroughly persuaded that the church is God's means for discipleship in this age? Who do you know that needs to be fastened into a particular local church?

Forming: Are you present for instruction? Are you involved in sharing the Word with others. Are you involved with others outside of Sunday, spending time with them, seeking to model Christ?