

Make Disciples: Another Look at the Great Commission

By Bob Young

Biblical Text: Matt 28:18-20

When we hear the word disciples (plural), we often think of great things. We think multitudes; we seek numbers. We easily miss a primary point: making disciples is individual. Disciples are made by hand, individually, one at a time. Disciples are not mass-produced. The process of making disciples is not a production line or an assembly line. Disciple-making is a process; it is time-intensive.

In our text, according to Jesus, disciple-making involves two things: (1) sharing the story (evangelizing) so that people are converted (baptized); (2) teaching and maturing (discipling).

Jesus was a disciple maker. That is how he spent his life. He spent most of his ministry making twelve disciples. The Twelve (apostles) are often called disciples in the books we know as the Gospels. The church must return to making disciples—both in local ministry and in mission work. A lot of good things have been done and are being done today in the name of the Lord. One can point to great prison works, significant benevolent works, great crowds of people served and helped—but for the most part the church continues to decline. Why? Without committed disciple-making that makes committed disciples, nothing else works. Everything comes up short. In some cases, we have forgotten that telling the story (evangelizing) is primary. When we do not tell the Good News, we should not be surprised that people are not baptized. In other cases, we have thought that disciple-making was successfully completed at baptism and we have overlooked or forgotten the necessity of continued teaching (often called discipling!). Disciple-making includes evangelizing and will result in baptisms, but that is not the end; that is only the beginning. Disciple-making is conversions and baptisms; disciple-making is teaching and discipling.

Discipleship is the main thing. Listen again to Jesus' last words. Disciple-making is the future of the church. Discipleship is the only thing that matters, it is the only mission we have, it is our only hope, it is the only way to develop mature Christians. Focus on discipleship—not on baptisms. We are measuring the wrong thing. How many disciples? That is a better question than, how many baptisms? We have missed Jesus' focus, we have missed the last words of Jesus' earthly ministry. Discipleship is what every ministry, church service, sermon, activity is about. Discipleship is God's plan.

In the Great Commission, Jesus gave his followers their mission. The Great Commission is your mission. Making disciples is your purpose, it is your goal in life, it is what you should do, it is your mission. One definition of mission is this: "a precise job to specific people to accomplish specific objective." To understand mission (and mission work), one must ask, "What is the specific objective?" That objective was given by Jesus: Make Disciples!

Mission refers to a specific task. What is the mission of the church? What is the mission God that gave the church? We can do lots of things—good things, but are they the mission? Our mission is the specific task we were given by Christ. What is that task? Jesus said, "As you go into the world..." Make a list of all of the ways the Bible completes that sentence. Only making disciples can be considered our mission. Mission work is about making disciples. Nothing else justifies sending a missionary.

Churches and missionaries want to make other things the mission. Some more conservative churches identify the mission as guarding the doctrine. Others see the mission as helping people. Still others see the mission as solving various problems in the world. Some churches and some Christians misidentify the mission—and soon the focus and the mission is great programs, or good church services, or great sermons, or pastoral care, or counseling, or benevolence, or.... These and many other things are important, but they are not the mission. The mission is making disciples. Read the Great Commission again. Read Luke 19:10; this is why Jesus came—to seek and to save the lost!

In more than a half century of preaching, I have been blessed by ministries, lessons, lectureships, singing, classes.... In other countries, I have helped build houses, I have supported medical efforts, education, sustainable farming, sewing classes, establishing businesses, church buildings, sponsoring children to meet basic physical needs. I support all of these things, but they are not the mission. The world is changed by making disciples. Disciples change the world; disciples change the world beginning where they are. The things mentioned above are the results of being a disciple. What changed you, what changed me, what changes us, is discipleship. We do these things, we do good works, as a result of being disciples. If discipleship is what changes us and what motivates such efforts, why would we not believe that the best way to

change the world is to make disciples. Go make disciples. The things mentioned are the results of discipleship, they are the products of the mission, they are not the mission. Discipleship leads to good works, not vice versa. Focus on making disciples, and you get God's warriors who love others and fight to rectify the bad in our world. Focus on social justice, model social justice, do good things, and you get neither disciples nor effective social justice.

Go make disciples, teach them discipleship, bring them to spiritual maturity. Then they will demonstrate the reality of committed discipleship in their lives, and they will make more disciples.

We fool ourselves when we think the Christian life is about involvement. We think that as long as people are involved in a program, attending, reading religious books, that they are becoming like Christ. These things can contribute to being like Christ, but nothing takes the place of making disciples.

If you have been listening, you are understanding something important. Two questions: What business are you in? How's business? The business of the church is making disciples.

I believe the church is struggling in many places because it is not making disciples—because it is not committed to the mission of the church. The church is distracted and sidetracked—when outreach focuses more on baptism than on making disciples, when mission work is not focused on making disciples. All kinds of projects are supported in the name of missions, but the mission is making disciples, and the question is, “how's business?” The result of God's mission work is new disciples, new churches, more followers, serious followers, growing churches.

You may disagree with the following statement, but it points to an important truth. Every disciple is involved in, supporting, encouraging, and facilitating disciple-making.

“Every disciple should make disciples. Not many, not most, but every disciple should make disciples. Not just church staff, not just mature Christians, not just evangelistic types. Regardless of travel and work schedule, status, gender, or age, every disciple should make disciples” (Steve Murrell, *Wikichurch*, pp. 141-42).

It is not enough to get people involved or attending. Discipleship is not about involvement. Because we misunderstood, we hired involvement ministers, we had involvement ministries, we developed surveys and programs; we used sermons and classes to motivate involvement. Getting involved does not make one into a disciple.

Let us get serious about the mission of the church. Let us focus on making disciples. That is the heart of missions that are focused on God's mission. Center everything around making disciples. Expect it, pray about it, talk it, preach it, sing it. Throw away ministries that do not help make disciples. Do not hire staff members who do not believe it and are not committed to making disciples. Do not appoint leaders who are not making disciples. Making disciples is the main thing. Recover this, and the church will flourish as it did in Acts 2.

For personal reflection—

A disciple has knowledge and experience with God.

A disciple has moved from death to life in Christ, and is moving continually toward greater spiritual maturity.

A disciple is relational, demonstrating healthy relationship with God and with others.

A disciple uses spiritual influence and relationships, intentionally helping move others toward the three goals just listed.

Disciples live out Christian principles in service and submission.

Disciples effectively use resources—self, stuff, and situations.

Disciples study, pray, confess, and encourage.

Disciples have an authentic baptism, a commitment to holy living, immersion in life of church, their own ministry, and are discipling others.

What business are you in? How's business?

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Note: David Young touched some of these themes in his book, *New Day*. Thanks to him for some germ thoughts and for a few specific wordings.