

October 17, 2010
Ephesians 4:7-16 / Titus 2:1-15 / Matthew 28:16-20
Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#5) -
The Disciple Making, People Equipping Church

Today I want to speak on what should be a very familiar topic to us all -- the topic of "**DISCIPLESHIP**" -- the **FOURTH** of the Seven Links in the **Chain of Church Health.**

And when I say it SHOULD BE a very familiar topic to us all, I don't simply mean as an idea / or a concept / or a duty we can affirm / because we see it spoken of in Scripture.

I mean that it should be such a life-priority for us / we should be so committed to doing it / and so experienced at doing it / that it should be like second nature for us to take an individual (or group of individuals) and "disciple them" in the basics of the faith.

Why do I say that? Because discipleship is not only indispensable to the life and health of any church, it's also every Christian's life commission! In fact, **Bill Hull** called it, "***The KEY to Building Healthy Christians in Today's Church.***"

Discipleship is the task Jesus has both commanded us to do / and left us here on earth to do! It's the task He's commissioned His Church to carry out / and expects us to pursue with all our hearts from the day He ascended to the day He returns!

So, in light of that binding commission from Jesus, what I'd like to do today is dissect it piece by piece! And in doing so show you who is called to the task of making disciples / who it is that we are called to make into disciples / what discipleship consists of / and in conclusion what sustains disciple-makers in the often difficult task of making disciples / beginning **FIRST**, with who is called to the work of making disciples.

And to most it would seem that the answer to that question is simple: ***ALL Christians everywhere are called to make disciples!***

Yet that hasn't always been the way people see it. Starting early on, some Church Fathers pointed out that this "commission" was NOT given to all the disciples, but to a specific few -- namely to "the eleven" who remained after Judas hung himself.

They pointed out how the passage specifically states: "***The ELEVEN went to Galilee -- to the mountain where Jesus had told THEM to go... And Jesus came to THEM (they would say, "them in particular") and said to them, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations..."***

THEY were the only truly "sent ones." That's what the word "apostle" means - "a sent one." And therefore it was suggested that the work of making disciples was limited to a select few / or an inner circle of specifically trained and commissioned people / and was NOT the task of every Christian.

Then, over time, as the Church became more consolidated / and organized / and the church of Rome developed its intricate "top down bureaucratic authority structure," that idea became more and more reinforced!

And because it was, discipleship or instruction in the faith (more prevalently called catechism or catechizing) became the exclusive domain of the trained clergy -- whether it be in the local parish or the on the foreign field.

Yet, since the clergy / or the ordained priesthood (including monks and nuns) / was limited to maybe 1 or 2 or 3% of the Christian population, at most, that left about 97% of all Christians uninvolved in any type of discipling activity. Not only were they made to feel they shouldn't do it, the church hierarchy taught them they couldn't.

So for many centuries (in fact, right up until the time of the Reformation) discipleship was seen as the exclusive calling (or the exclusive domain) of a very small / elite / selectively chosen / highly trained / and officially ordained group of people.

Yet at the Reformation, Luther chipped away at that century old dividing wall between the clergy and the laity, when he set forth what would become known as the Protestant doctrine of the "Priesthood of all Believers."

It was a teaching based in Peter's blanket declaration in I Peter 2:9 where he says to ALL BELIEVERS:

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into His glorious light."

Or Ephesians 4:11-12 where Paul tells us that "**Christ gave some to be... pastors and teachers...**" For what purpose? To simply minister to people as they came to sit in the pews each Sunday (as they had for many centuries, from about 350 AD till 1500 AD)?

NO! They were given the gift of pastor/teacher so that they might, "**prepare God's people for works or service or the work of ministry.**"

Yet over time, even in some Protestant circles, this passage came to be seen as limited to a select few -- though not to the ordained clergy alone. Rather, what Protestant people often did was look at the reference to "the nations" / see it as referring to nation-states or other countries / focus on the word "go" and then assume that this was a verse that applied specifically to missionaries - - instead of all Christians everywhere!

Even when I went to seminary (an evangelical seminary where I majored in missions) I was given the distinct impression that this was "a missions text." It was a verse I memorized for my class on world missions!

"It's the verse that justifies the church's work of engaging in foreign missions," people would say. "It's the verse that tells those with the calling of a missionary that they need to go and what they need to do when they get there!"

And I agree - to a degree! It IS a verse that justifies the work of foreign missions -- make no mistake about that!

But when we mistakenly LIMIT IT to the activity of missionaries alone / or make it the exclusive domain of foreign missions alone / then we drift into error -- not only by misunderstanding the text, but by misusing it as well.

In fact, when we make that mistake, we "miss the mark" or essentially sin because Jesus NEVER intended its application to be limited in that way!

This passage is NOT simply a commission for missionaries! It's a commission for all Christians! We are all to be involved, in different ways, in the work of disciple-making -- regardless of where we live!

That comes out more clearly in Acts 1:8, where Jesus says (presumably on the same day He gave the Great Commission) to all the disciples gathered there (at least 120): ***"But you will receive power, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."***

It couldn't be any clearer! Every Christian, in every place, who receives the Holy Spirit (and you can't be a Christian if you haven't received the Holy Spirit) is called to share the Good News about Jesus. And when they do so, they are engaging in the work of making disciples.

This is a home and abroad task! These believers were to do it in Jerusalem / and in the neighboring towns 10-20 miles south in the area of Judea / and 30 to 50 miles north in the area known as Samaria / and then continue out from there in concentric circles until their witnessing and discipling activity reached "the ends of the earth."

"But I don't have the confidence," you say. "I still struggle with doubts," you say. "But I don't have a good enough grasp of the Bible myself," you say. And all that may be true!

But don't let that stop you! What does our passage say of the "Eleven" He commissioned initially? It says quite plainly, ***"When they saw Him they worshipped Him, BUT SOME DOUBTED."*** There stood Jesus, in His glorious and resurrected body, right before their very eyes, yet "some doubted."

Did their doubts exclude them? Did their doubts or possible feelings of unpreparedness nullify Jesus divine commission to them? NO! Doubts and lack of confidence and being unprepared didn't let them off the hook!

It merely meant they needed to do what any person in that situation would need to do. Work through their doubts / and shore up their confidence / and seek out the knowledge and training they needed to prepare them to do what God called, and commissioned or commanded them to do.

And LISTEN: WE will all do it in different ways. Not everyone is called to lead a Bible Study, or preach, or be an open air evangelist (like Ted does in Tanzania).

But we can ALL mentor someone. We can ALL share something. We can ALL encourage and pray with others. We can ALL point people to Jesus.

We can ALL tell people the things God has done for us / and how faithful and trustworthy He is / and how He saved us / and forgiven us / and provided for us / and guided us / and filled us with His Spirit and love and power / and answered our prayers and helped us in our time of need!

And THAT is discipleship! We will all do it in different ways (using our different gifts and abilities) but we must all do it if the task is ever to be completed!

Then **SECONDLY**, who is it that we're called to disciple? "All nations."

"***Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations...***" says Jesus. Yet what I'd like to point out is that in the Greek, the word "nations" is "*tn ethvn*" -- "*ethvn*" being the Greek word from which we get our English word "ethnicity" or "ethnic background."

It's a term that refers more to all the differing ethnic groups that exist on the face of the earth, than to geo-political nation states whose borders and boundaries we see drawn on a map.

Which means that (unlike us) the earliest disciples would have thought more along the lines of their fellow Jews, and the various ethnic groups living within their own borders (like the Palestinians, or Samaritans and Edomites and Moabites) / as well as the other larger people groups lying outside their borders (like the Arabs and Persians and Parthians and Medes and Elamites and Goths and Franks and so forth).

It's more about people groups than places!

We are called to make disciples out of every ethnic group of people on the face of this earth -- including our own families and children and neighbors and co-workers -- be they of German or Dutch or English or Italian or Zulu or Kairen or Arab or Persian or hispanic descent. We need to begin right where we are, in our own back yard, and then moving out from there or targeting all those areas at the same time!

In fact, given the fact that this passage is more about people groups than places, it would probably be better to see this text as a "mission" text, rather than a "foreign missions" text (as many do).

That is, to see it as a text which tells us what our "mission" or "purpose" or "goal in life" is to be! / That as a church we exist for the purpose of completing Christ's stated "commission" to disciple every last ethnic group of the face of this earth (many of which are moving into our neighborhoods and attending our colleges and starting up businesses and living right down the street from us -- beckoning us to heed Christ's command and fulfill the great commission by discipling them)!

It's a text that tells us why God has placed us here and why He's left us here between the time of His first and second coming, and what we need to be earnestly and intentionally engaged in doing before He returns! Stepping outside of our comfort zones / and moving beyond our doubts and fears and inhibitions / and doing what He has commanded us to do!

Which brings us to the **THIRD** thing this text tells us. Chuck did an excellent presentation on it at the Men's Group last month and Ted spoke on the same thing at the Chili cook-off a week ago Friday. God seems to be driving it home from every possible angle! What is it? That the command is not so much to "Go," but to "make disciples" as we're going, or working, or living out our everyday lives wherever we may be! Chuck alluded to this in our men's group meeting last month (which I was tempted to ask him to share again, this morning, with all of you)!

I always knew this passage was about making disciples, rather than simply making converts. It was about more than simply doing evangelism.

Yet I remained under the impression that the emphasis of this text was on "going," rather than "discipling." Because I always thought the word "go" was in the imperative, and the word translated "make disciples" merely followed on its heels as something we should do after we get where we're called to go!

That's why I, like so many others, saw it as a "foreign missions" text, rather than a "mission" text!

In fact, as I pointed out to Nathan, there's a hymn in our hymnal that makes that same mistake. It goes like this: "***Go therefore and teach all nations - Go, Go, Go! / Go therefore and teach all nations, Go, Go, Go! / Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost... Go, Go Go.***" Twenty-seven times people chant the word, "GO"!

Yet that's NOT where the emphasis lies! Because the word "go" is not the word that's in the imperative or command form. "**Go**" is an aorist nom. plur. part., which should be translated "***having gone,***" or "***as you're all going.***"

The word that's in the imperative or command form is the word we translate: "***make disciples.***" That's where the emphasis lies! That's the thing Jesus is stressing and commanding them and us to do! **Not to "go," but "make disciples" as we're going, wherever God, or wherever our calling in life takes us!**

Thus the hymn should be changed to sing like this: "Go therefore and teach all nations... Disciple, Disciple, Disciple! / Go therefore and teach all nations... Disciple, Disciple, Disciple! / Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost... Disciple, Disciple, Disciple! "

Twenty-nine times we should hear that chant - "Disciple! Disciple! Disciple!" Until the light goes on and we say, "Alright already! I get it and now I'll do it!"

Because that's what we're commanded to do, folks! Disciple, as we go, or as we're going, wherever we may go in this life or in our daily lives! And again, although discipleship must sometimes be structured and intentional and well-organized and consistent and systematic, it doesn't have to be! Because as

Jesus says, it's to be done, "as you're going." That is, as you're going about your daily activities in life, in all your travels and daily interactions with people!

You can disciple at breakfast or lunch or dinner / at the local coffee shop or pub / through emails or on Facebook / at the park while the kids are playing or while you're playing a game of cards / In fact, you can disciple through greeting cards or letters or phone calls!

Because in its most basic form, discipleship is simply you, sharing what you know about Jesus, with other people -- praying that they would come to trust in Him / and be baptized into the name of our Triune God / and come to obey all that Jesus has commanded us.

We have daily opportunities to "disciple" every time we intentionally or even unintentionally tell anyone or teach others anything about Jesus and the things He's called us, or commanded us, to do!

Sometimes I think we scare people away from doing discipleship, because we make it seem like it's so complicated that only a person with a Phd could even begin to do it! Thereby reinforcing the very mindset we need to get rid of -- that its somehow the exclusive domain of specialists or trained people like clergy and missionaries!

Not so! His commission is to all of us and it goes like this (if I may paraphrase):
"Therefore, as you are going, make disciples of every ethnic group or people group you encounter, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

The **LAST**, what sustains disciple-makers in the often difficult task of making disciples? Jesus tells us: It's His power and His presence. / This commission is both preceded and followed by two declarations that cannot be ignored, and keep what is sandwiched between them from seeming like an absurd, outrageous and impossible task.

The **FIRST** comes in verse 18, where Jesus says: "***All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me.***" And as we know from the Gospels, the word "authority" includes the authority to exercise divine power against all that which opposes God's rule or reign or purposes!

Thus we read in Matthew 10:1: "***He called His twelve disciples to Him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and heal every disease and sickness.***" Thus we see that in Scripture, the word "authority" includes with it the ability to exercise of divine power on God's behalf, to bring about what He desires to accomplish through us.

Thus, when Jesus says He's been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" He means that God the Father has given Him -- total reign and total power -- and that He is going to exercise all that power and that divine authority to bring about what He's about to command them to do!

That's why the word "therefore" shows up in verse 19! "***All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me... THEREFORE (on the basis of that FACT) as you are going, make disciples of all nations...!***

It's because He's told me that that I can "go" knowing it's not all up to me! It's not all laid on my weak shoulders! It's all being orchestrated and empowered and overseen by the sovereign, exalted and glorified Christ who reigns over heaven and earth!

He not only wills that it be done, but will exercise all the power and authority He's been given to make sure it gets carried out! He will give us all we need to carry out the task He calls us to do!

In fact, in light of what He says, I have no excuse to justify my lack of involvement in the task, because as the One with all power and authority He will give me whatever I need as I go!

But that's not all. It's not just His sovereign power and divine authority being exercised with the distinct and focused purpose of carrying out that particular task, it's also the promise of His presence!

That's the **SECOND** thing we see. After commanding them to make disciples as they're going, He concludes with this word of encouragement: "***And surely I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.***"

What does He mean? We may feel like we're in it alone at times. We may feel like He's nowhere to be found. We may feel like He's left us to do the task in isolation. But that's only our misguided perceptions. For the TRUTH is, we are never alone!

Jesus IS there, and sees everything we do, and is with us in all we're going through, and stands beside us every step of the way. Because according to this promise -- no one who does the work of discipleship ever does it alone!

Some people have said to me that they have never sensed or felt the presence or power of the Holy Spirit. And my initial response is: "Have you ever engaged in the work of making disciples?" Because what we often forget is that the promise of God's power and presence is not so much for our everyday wants and desires, but for the fulfillment of His kingdom purposes!

Or in other words: If you want to experience His power and presence, get involved in witnessing and discipling, because that's the primary reason for the giving of those things to His people. It is to empower and encourage them in the task of discipling the nations!

Which is not only our commission, but His command to us. Whatever we need for THAT task, he will provide -- be it the soul-strengthening assurance of His manifest presence or the gift of divine power and authority which will defeat the powers that oppose the completion of that purpose.