

**An Examination of "Making Disciples of All Nations"
in Matthew 28:18-20
Part II**

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Organizations, such as the Navigators, have popularized the term "discipling" in Christian circles. Though much is written on the ministry of discipling, many believers still misinterpret the concept or fail to apply it. Based upon the conclusions from Matthew 28:19-20 in the last article, this article presents some principles¹ applicable to the twentieth century by discussing the following categories: the agents for discipling others (who), the goal of discipling others (what), the motivation for discipling others (why), and the methodology for discipling others (how).

The Agents for Discipling Others

The agents for discipling others are disciples. The Reformers believed the Great Commission was addressed solely to the eleven apostles without any binding requirements on post-Apostolic believers.² However, the view of the eleven apostles as the initial leaders and representatives of the Church³ is better supported by Scripture, as shown by the following observations. First, the other mission text in Matthew (Matt. 10) extends beyond the initial activity of the twelve (Matt. 10:23, 41-42). Second, the task to disciple all nations was not accomplished by the twelve; nor has it yet been achieved in all of church history. Third, the promise of Matthew 28:20 is given to all believers living in the interim preceding Christ's

second coming. Fourth, discipling in the early church was the responsibility of laymen also (e.g. Stephen, Philip). While the twelve were eyewitnesses, believers today are "earwitnesses."

The activity of discipling is both a corporate and an individual responsibility. Corporately, local churches are to be involved in discipling.⁴ "From the first century until the present the church has been alive and vital only when it has taken this command seriously."⁵ This discipling includes both the training of laity to disciple and a commitment to church-planting. The church should train believers in the ministry of evangelizing the lost; establishing new converts through baptism, church membership, and basic Bible studies; and edifying all saints unto personal growth. The training process includes five stages: instruction, illustration, involvement, improvement, and inspiration.⁶ In the instruction stage, a qualified leader teaches the believer all about a specific ministry. In the illustration stage, the leader models the specific ministry by his own example. In the involvement stage, the leader ministers together with the student. In the improvement stage, the leader evaluates the student's effectiveness and proficiency in the specific ministry. In the inspiration stage, the leader periodically encourages the student to continue in his specific ministry.

Like the church at Antioch, every local church should focus on church-planting, both national and international. This church-planting ministry begins with evangelism and subsequent conversions. Then the mission calls all believers to make a public confession of devoted discipleship (immersion) and nurtures believers into a committed relationship of obedience to Christ. A church not committed to these tasks has not obeyed the Lord.

Each believer of the church should be involved in discipling others. He should seek to see men and women converted to Christ (evangelism) and confess their allegiance to Christ (immersion). Yet, his responsibility does not end with baptism.⁷ All believers should be involved at some level of teaching (informal or formal) which results in the growth of others. This teaching encompasses everything from rearing godly children and fellowshiping with another believer over lunch to the structured teaching of a Bible study group, a Sunday school class, or a pulpit ministry. Although some are called to full-time Gospel ministries (pastors, missionaries, professors), all believers are called to minister (Eph. 4:12).

The Goal of Discipling Others

The goal of discipling others is as specific as helping individuals have a vital relationship with Christ and as broad as reaching all men with the claims of Christ. Specifically, the believer's goal in discipling another is to see another person believe in, fellowship with, and imitate Christ's person; and submit to and obey Christ's teaching.⁸ "The key to discipleship is one's relationship to Jesus."⁹ Keller elaborates on the following qualities of a committed disciple: knowledge--a disciple learns of his master; character--a disciple knows his master, obeys his master, imitates his master; ministry--a disciple serves his master.¹⁰ As a result of being disciplined, the disciple should also be involved in discipling others.

Recently, the goal of discipling has not been clearly articulated because of the debates over the content of a church's mission and over the relationship between discipleship and conversion. Hesselgrave notes that the Christian mission "is primarily one of proclaiming the Christian gospel and bringing people to repentance, faith and fellowship, and conformance to Christ in his church."¹¹ Yet, certain men within the evangelical ranks¹² believe that the "mission encompasses all that the church is sent into the world to do, including humanitarian service, and the quest for better social structures. In short, according to this view, social and political activities are *partners* of evangelism and church growth in the Christian mission."¹³ Certainly, a believer is to love his neighbor by providing for him physically (Matt. 5:42). Yet, the commission of Matthew 28:19 does not call Christians to an agenda of political reform and social upheaval. Rather, "the primary means of effecting social betterment in any society is to increase the number of those who -- as Christian laymen, evangelists and pastors -- will give allegiance to Jesus Christ and become the salt and light of that society."¹⁴ A transformed believer should interact in love and truth within all of his relationships.

The relationship of discipleship to conversion is viewed in three ways.¹⁵ First, some believe discipleship is salvation.¹⁶ Second, others believe discipleship as taught by Christ is subsequent to salvation.¹⁷ Third, many allege that discipleship includes conversion and sanctification.¹⁸ Though this writer accepts the third view based upon the evidence of Scripture,¹⁹ he rejects the demand of "a total 'front load' commitment as a part of the gospel of grace."²⁰ Repentance and belief denote a willingness to change (I Thess. 1:9,10) and a

submission to Christ's person (II Thess. 1:8), and result in a directional change in the convert's life (Matt. 3:8ff). Baptism, which immediately follows conversion in the New Testament, expresses a believer's commitment to Christ as master. A lost man should understand he is entering into a submissive relationship with Christ, who delivers from the penalty and power of sin. Yet, to expect an unconverted man to meet all the requirements of discipleship found in the Gospels at the time of salvation is not Scriptural. First, the calls to a special kind of discipleship (the twelve) found in Luke nine, Luke fourteen, and Matthew nineteen were unique to the first century.²¹ Second, the evangelistic messages in Acts are quite different from the discipleship passages found in the Gospels. Third, the epistles deal with many of the demands of discipleship through sanctification. While Joseph of Arimathea was clearly a saved disciple (Matt. 27:57; Luke 23:50-51), he was not fully committed (John 19:38). Even the twelve did not live up to Christ's teaching on true discipleship.²² The carnality of the believers in I Corinthians three, the lack of devotion of a righteous Lot (I Pet. 2:7,8), or the selfishness of a saved Samson (Heb. 11:32,33) cannot be explained if conversion were synonymous with total dedication. These were disciples who were not living up to the reality of their relationship with Christ.²³

The broad goal of discipling others is world-wide outreach. The "mission to make disciples transcends all cultural, racial[,] linguistic or ethnic barriers."²⁴ No single church can accomplish this task. Yet, through the united effort of committed local churches,²⁵ planting additional local churches throughout the earth as communities of disciples, the commission of Christ will be progressively realized. This universal outreach is in keeping with the burden of Paul in Romans 15:20,21--". . . I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named . . ." "Being a disciple is to become the co-worker of Christ in his world-wide mission."²⁶

A local church can use several means to give people a world-wide vision. Firstly, various opportunities, including preaching and special mission conferences, should be used to impress a burden for the lost world upon the members. Secondly, it could develop outreach programs in keeping with the burden. The key ingredients to any mission outreach includes men (those who go) and money (those who support missionaries). Thirdly, the church could involve the members in outreach through mission fellowships and mission trips.

Motivation for Discipling Others

The motivation for discipling others is found in Christ. Christ's authoritative position as universal sovereign (Matt. 28:18) demands the homage of all men. At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow (Phil. 2:9-11). A king does not *ask* his followers to obey his commission, rather he *commands* their obedience to his commission. His command has a tone of urgency.²⁷ Christ's abiding presence with his disciples (Matt. 28:20) encourages believers to obey him. The believer is never alone in the remotest part of the earth nor in the darkest hour of his life. Before a believer will effectively disciple others, he must see his activity as an outworking of the desires of Christ.²⁸

The motivation for discipling others is mediated through church leadership. Leadership must model discipling, communicate a vision for discipling to be exercised by all the "ministers" within the body, and train the saints in a methodology of discipling.²⁹

Methodology for Discipling Others

The focus of the methodology for making disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 is two-fold: to facilitate a decisive commitment to Christ through baptism and to promote growth and obedience to the teachings of Christ. An overall discipling ministry in a church includes evangelism of the lost. Yet, Matthew seems to focus on the commitment of the new convert and his assimilation into the body so that he can grow through the Word. Whereas baptism is only administered once in a believer's life, teaching is a life-long process. As a believer yields to the teaching of the Word, he is practically living out his discipleship to Christ (cf. Acts 14:21).

What should be the content of the teaching which produces disciples? Ultimately, it should be the whole counsel of God. Typically, discipling organizations deal with topical issues from the Scriptures which have a specific bearing on a young convert.³⁰ Yet, the structure of Matthew suggests that an effective discipleship curriculum should develop the teachings of Christ with a special emphasis on the five major discourses. The discipleship curriculum would be strengthened even more by balancing the Matthean concentration on the imperative and what man must do, with the Pauline concentration on the indicative and what God has done.³¹ For instance, a discipler could design the curriculum under the

following headings: the believer's position in Christ, the believer's privileges in Christ, the believer's purpose in Christ, the believer's potential in Christ, and the believer's practical progress in Christ.

Much popular contemporary literature unfolds pragmatic techniques for making disciples. One central question is whether there is one or many viable techniques for teaching others. To answer this question one must determine if Matthew 28:19-20 implies (implication is a part of meaning) that one "must minister by specifically imitating Jesus' model."³² If it is not an implication, then the application of aspects of Christ's teaching methodology is optional and not binding. Shank notes that differing levels of normativeness exist within any paradigm.³³ Although the unique position of Christ mitigates against the normativeness of his specific teaching practices,³⁴ Matthew's care to describe Christ's discipling ministry primarily in relation to the twelve suggests that Matthew 28:19,20 at least implies the normativeness of the underlying principles of Christ's teaching methodology. Though the early church did not subscribe to the rabbi-disciple model, it did follow the underlying principles found in Christ's earthly ministry. The underlying principles of continuity seem to be personal interaction and accountability.³⁵ These principles, which explain the process of discipling, are most effective within small group or one-on-one relationships. The concepts of leadership development and fellowship,³⁶ which are predominant both in Acts and in the epistles, capture the purpose of Jesus' teaching methodology.³⁷ Within each are motivations for growth (verbally through the Scripture or visually through one's example), discussions concerning specific applications, and evaluations of the disciple's progress. With these underlying principles intact, a specific outward strategy can take several forms.³⁸ Shank concludes, "It would seem that our best approach would be to select the strategy that deals specifically with our definition of mission and is most congruent with our specific needs, personnel and cultural circumstances."³⁹

Conclusion

This article has suggested some applications of discipleship for the twentieth century. The agents for discipling are individual disciples working within the church corporately. The church is to be training believers for discipling ministries. The specific goal of discipling is to bring someone into a vital, submissive, and obedient relationship with

Christ. Thus the church's mission is primarily spiritual. Discipleship includes conversion and sanctification. The broad goal of discipleship for the church encompasses the whole world. The motivation for discipling others is the authoritative position of Christ and the abiding presence of Christ. In Matthew's account, the focus of the methodology of discipling is to facilitate a decisive commitment to Christ through immersion and to promote growth and obedience to the teachings of Christ. Although the content of teaching can be the entire Word of God, Matthew emphasizes the five major discourses. The teaching methodology which is binding on all believers is the personal interaction and accountability found in the ministry of Christ and the early church. The specific outworking of those principles is diverse.

Discipleship should never be an addendum in the lives of God's people. "Perhaps no more significant challenge faces those who would call themselves Jesus' followers than the challenge of obedience to the closing charge of the Gospel-- to make disciples in every part of the world (28:19)."⁴⁰

Notes:

¹ This article establishes some general principles, rather than specific programs and practices, which, though helpful, are beyond the scope of this article. For a discussion of specific practices, see Win Arn and Charles Arn, *The Master's Plan for Making Disciples* (Pasadena, Ca.: Church Growth Press, 1982); Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978); Francis M. Cosgrove, Jr., *Essentials of Discipleship* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1980); Bill Hull, *Jesus Christ Disciplemaker* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1984); Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell, 1988); Allan Coppedge, *The Biblical Principles of Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1989); and Allen Hadidian, *Discipleship Helping Other Christians Grow* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979).

² See David J. Hesselgrave, "Confusion concerning the Great Commission," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 15:4 (October 1979): 197-198; and O'Brien, 254-255.

³ Recker, "Matthew 28:18-20 interpreted from the Point of View of the Apostolate," in *Zending Op Weg Naar de Toekomst* (Kaapen: Uitgeversmaatxchappi J. H. Kok, 1978), 49-52. For the application of this command to all believers, see Culver, "What is the Church's Commission?," *BibSac* 125:499 (July-September 1968), 241; Peter O'Brien, "The Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 -- A Missionary Mandate or not?" *Evangelical Review of*

Theology 2:2 (October 1978), 264, 267; and Michael J. Wilkins, *The Concept of Disciple in Matthew's Gospel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 168-169.

⁴ The practice of the early church provides no clearly stated divine mandate for parachurch organizations. This writer sees great value in parachurch organizations which work for the establishment or development of local churches. Concerning the ministry of parachurch organizations, James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 28, states that "the essential difference being that the latter [parachurch organization] is called to work along side the local church without being a direct part of it. As such, it is a service agency and can include denominational structures, mission boards, broadcasters, publishers, and so on. Furthermore, its existence is warranted only insofar as it is still needed. There is no divine mandate for perpetuation whatsoever."

⁵ Engel, 64. Arn (p. 127) goes on to define "church-centered disciple-making" as an "intentional strategy and priority of the church which initiates disciple-making, trains members in disciple-making, uses resources of the Body, creates support resources, and incorporates new believers into the church."

⁶ Taken from Bruce H. Wilkinson, *The Seven Laws of the Learner* (Atlanta: Walk Thru the Bible Ministries, Inc., 1988), 66-67.

⁷ See Engel, 32.

⁸ Adapted from Alfred Plummer, "Disciple," in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, vol. 1, edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1916), 303.

⁹ Allen G. Arensen, "Making disciples according to Christ's plan," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 16:2 (April 1980), 103. Timothy J. Keller, "Pastoral Ministry" (unpublished class syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985), 79, describes a relationship as "a mutual interchange of truth and love."

¹⁰ Keller, 79-81.

¹¹ Hesselgrave, "Confusion concerning the Great Commission," 201.

¹² For instance, John Stott tries to purport that John 20:21 teaches socio-political action (Hesselgrave, p.202). Wesley R. Hurd, "A Discussion of the Social Implications of the Great Commission" (Th.M. thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1977) tries to substantiate a similar view from an analysis of the Gospels. His argumentation is unconvincing.

¹³ Hesselgrave, "Confusion concerning the Great Commission," 201.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁵ Taken from Richard D. Calenberg, "The New Testament Doctrine of Discipleship" (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1981), 3-16, 247-250.

¹⁶ For a list of proponents in the evangelical, neo-orthodox, and liberal camps; see Calenberg, 3-13.

¹⁷ Some of the proponents are Calenberg, Zane Hodges, J. Dwight Pentecost, Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, Everett Harrison.

¹⁸ For example, see John R. W. Stott in "Must Christ be Lord to be Savior?" *Eternity* 10:9 (September 1959); John MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Panorama City, Ca.: Word of Grace, 1988); and James M. Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).

¹⁹ The inextricable interchange of conversion and discipleship is seen in Matthew 10:32-42; 11:28-29; and 28:19 (baptism is both the picture of conversion and proclamation of discipleship). Luke uses "disciple" as a synonym for a Christian in Acts. For additional proof, see Michael J. Wilkins, "A Two-level System of

Christians in the Early Church? Clarification from Discipleship in Matthew's Gospel," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, New Orleans, 15-17 November 1990.

²⁰ A. Boyd Luter, review of *Christ's Call to Discipleship*, by James M. Boice, In *Criswell Theological Review*, 2:2 (Spring 1988): 480. For a convincing critique of *The Gospel according to Jesus* by John MacArthur, see Darrell L. Bock, "A Review of The Gospel according to Jesus," *BibSac* 146:581 (January-March 1989).

²¹ For a summary of first century discipleship practices, see Douglas Finkbeiner, "Toward an Understanding of 'Make Disciples of All Nations,'" (Th.M. thesis, Calvary Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), 15-23. In the pericope of the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-30; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30), the conditions laid upon the rich young ruler would shock him into an awareness of his sinfulness since he was unable to live as one of the twelve (cf. Calenberg, pp.145-146). To make this isolated situation a paradigm of evangelism is dangerous. The early church does not evangelize in such a fashion. If this condition of Christ is to be used in evangelism, how about Christ's command to love God and love your neighbor for inheriting eternal life in Luke 10:28,37? Matthew 19:16-30 should be understood contextually. Primarily, the passage seeks to correct the disciples' wrong view of the nature of salvation (vss.13,14) and the evidence of salvation (vss.24,25). See Calenberg, 137-146, for a detailed examination of the rich young ruler.

²² For a fuller discussion, see Finkbeiner, 26-28.

²³ This writer is not excusing or espousing disobedient lifestyles. It is an anomaly to live such a lifestyle in light of one's new position, disposition, power, and desires. No one living in constant disobedience can assure themselves of eternal life. Yet, Scripture declares they still may be saved.

²⁴ Douglas H. Shank, "The Great Commission to 'Make Disciples:' Its Interpretation and Application to Mission Strategy" (Th. M. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1985), 108.

²⁵ Often, the burden for universal outreach has been borne by missionary agencies rather than churches. This writer is not promoting an ecumenical union in which truth is compromised. Rather, churches of like faith and practice can band together in this endeavor.

²⁶ Hans Kvalbein, "Go therefore and make disciples . . . The concept of discipleship in the New Testament" *Themelios* 13:2 (Jan./Feb. 1988), 52.

²⁷ The urgency comes from the preparatory participle, *proeuthentes*.

²⁸ To motivate complacent believers the church's leadership should repeatedly communicate Christ's desires publicly through worship services, Sunday school classes, and small groups organized for discipling ministries. In addition, individuals can privately testify to other believers about the honor of obeying the command of the King and the confidence of walking with the Savior.

²⁹ See Hull, *Disciple Making Pastor* for a compelling and practical presentation of the leader's role in discipling.

³⁰ For a helpful presentation, see Keller, 90-95 and Charles R. Phelps, Jr., "A manual for Discipleship in the Local Church" (D. Min., Bob Jones University). This writer commends these approaches as long as the topics are handled expositionally rather than by proof texting.

³¹ For the complementary emphases of Matthew and Paul, see Mohrlang, 127-128.

³² See Shank, 45-47, for a discussion of the hermeneutical issues of implications and significances.

³³ *Ibid.*, 50, 115-116.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵ Accountability describes a protective relationship that a disciple has with one or several other believers, in which he is consistently reminded of his obligation to Christ and encouraged in his walk with Christ.

³⁶ Fellowship defines the sharing of truth (the teaching of Scripture applied to the unmasked experiences of a man's soul) in a context of love and trust so that relationships are deepened with God and between fellow believers.

³⁷ For a development of these concepts, see Coleman, *The Master Plan of Discipleship*, 67-74, 146-148; and Covell, "Biblical Models for Successful Teaching," 110-116.

³⁸ See Shank, 30-77, for several leading strategies based on Biblical theologies, Biblical terms, and Biblical themes.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁰ Craig Blomberg, "The Gospel of Matthew," (class syllabus, Denver Seminary, 1991), 2.