

The Command to Make Disciples

Imagine your reaction if someone came back from the dead to speak to you. Seriously, try to imagine that right now. What would you feel? How intensely would you listen? How seriously would you take his or her words? Think about what this must have been like for the disciples. They were working their everyday jobs when a mysterious teacher asked them to follow Him. As they followed, they saw Him challenge religious leaders, embrace sinners, heal the sick, and even raise the dead. They knew that He was not an ordinary man. At various times and to varying degrees, people saw Him as the Messiah who would bring salvation for God's people. But He never quite fit anyone's expectations of what the Messiah would do or say. The disciples walked beside Jesus through all of this. They watched as the blind were given sight. They heard Jesus forgive the hopelessly unrighteous and restore the lives of the broken. They helped pass out bread and fish as Jesus miraculously fed huge crowds. The disciples seem to have been more aware of Jesus's true identity at some points than at others, but they followed Him until the end, believing that He was the one who would restore the fortunes of God's people. And then He died. Just like that. It was over. It seemed that Jesus could do absolutely anything, that He had power over sickness, death, every person, and everything. By this power, Jesus was bringing the healing and redemption that the world so desperately needed. But the disciples' hopes of a better world died as Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross. And so the disciples spent three days in confusion and disillusionment. Everything they had hoped for was gone. Perhaps they had wasted their time following this mysterious person for three years. Then it happened. He came back from the dead! When Jesus reappeared on the third day, all of their hope came rushing back! Now there could be no doubt! Now that Jesus had conquered even sin and death, He would certainly fix this broken world. Jesus would accomplish what everyone was longing to see. There could be no stopping Him. Once again, He surprised everyone. Instead of telling them that He would immediately transform the earth, Jesus gave His disciples one final command and ascended into heaven. Just like that, out of nowhere. What was the command? Essentially, He told them it was their job to finish what He started. They were to take the message that Jesus declared and exemplified in and around Jerusalem and spread that message to the very ends of the earth: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. (Matt. 28:18–20)

Q1 Stop for a minute and read Matthew 28. Try to place yourself in the disciples' shoes as they witnessed these things and heard these words from Jesus. How do you think you would have reacted?

The Great Commission and the Church

So what comes to your mind when you think about Jesus's command to make disciples of all nations? Many read these words as if they were meant to inspire pastors or missionaries on their way out to the mission field. But have you ever considered that maybe Jesus's command is meant for you? As we read the rest of the New Testament, we see God's people working together in obedience to Jesus's command. They reached out to the people around them, calling them to obediently follow Jesus. The disciples went about making disciples, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus had commanded and baptizing them. Some of them even moved to different areas or traveled around so that they could tell more people. They took Jesus's words seriously—and literally. Reading through the New Testament, it's not surprising to read that Jesus's followers were focused on making disciples—it makes sense in light of Jesus's ministry and the Great Commission. The surprise comes when we look at our churches today in light of Jesus's command to make disciples. Why is it that we see so little disciple making taking place in the church today? Do we really believe that Jesus told His early followers to make disciples but wants the twenty-first-century church to do something different? None of us would claim to believe this, but somehow we have created a church culture where the paid ministers do the "ministry," and the rest of us show up, put some money in the plate, and leave feeling inspired or "fed." We have moved so far away from Jesus's command that many Christians don't have a frame of reference for what disciple making looks like.

Q2 Assess your church experience in light of Jesus's command to make disciples. Would you say that your church is characterized by disciple making? Why or why not?

More Than a Program

So what does disciple making look like? We have to be careful about how we answer this question. For some of us, our church experience has been so focused on programs that we immediately think about Jesus's command to make disciples in programmatic terms. We expect our church leaders to create some sort of disciple-maker campaign where we sign up, commit to participating for a few months, and then get to cross the Great Commission off our list. But making disciples is far more than a program. It is the mission of our lives. It defines us. A disciple is a disciple maker. So what does this look like? The Great Commission uses three phrases to describe what disciple making entails: go, baptize people, and teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded. Simple, right? It's incredibly simple in the sense that it doesn't require a degree, an ordination process, or some sort of hierarchical status. It's as simple as going to people, encouraging them to follow Jesus (this is what baptism is all about), and then teaching them to obey Jesus's commands (which we find in the Bible). The concept itself is not very difficult. But the simplest things to understand are often the most difficult to put into practice. Let's start with baptism. In your church setting, baptism may not seem like that big of a deal. Maybe

that's why so many Christians today have never been baptized. But in the early days of the church, baptism was huge. Baptism was an unmistakable act that marked a person as a follower of Jesus Christ. As Jesus died and was buried in the earth, so a Christian is plunged beneath the surface of the water. As Jesus emerged from the tomb in a resurrected body, so a Christian comes out of the waters of baptism as a new creation. When first-century Christians took this step of identifying themselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus, they were publicly declaring their allegiance to Christ. This immediately marked them for martyrdom—all of the hostility that the world felt toward Jesus would now be directed at them. Baptism was a declaration that a person's life, identity, and priorities were centered on Jesus and His mission. Depending on where you live in the world, you may not see the same reaction to your choice to be baptized, but that act of identifying with Christ is essential, no matter where you live.

Q3 Have you identified yourself with Jesus through being baptized? If so, why do you think this was an important step for you to take? If not, what is holding you back from being baptized?

Just as baptism is more significant than we might have thought, so teaching people to obey Jesus's commands is an enormous task. Realistically, this will require a lifetime of devotion to studying the Scriptures and investing in the people around us. Neither of these things is easy, nor can they be checked off of a list. We are never really "done." We continually devote ourselves to studying the Scriptures so that we can learn with ever-greater depth and clarity what God wants us to know, practice, and pass on. We continually invest in the people around us, teaching them and walking with them through life's joys and trials. We never "finish" the discipleship process. It's much like raising a child: though there comes a day when she is ready to be on her own, the relationship doesn't end. The friendship continues, and there will always be times when guidance and encouragement are still needed. In addition to that, God continually brings new people into our path, giving us fresh opportunities to start the discipleship process all over again. Following Jesus by making disciples isn't difficult to understand, but it can be very costly. Jesus's teachings are often difficult to stomach. By sharing His teachings, we are often rejected along with His message. Jesus said: If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: "A servant is not greater than his master." If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. (John 15:18–20) It's easy enough to understand, but it can be extremely costly.

Q4 Would you say that you're ready to commit yourself to studying the Scriptures and investing in the people around you? Why or why not?

Equipped to Do the Work of Ministry

Unfortunately, disciple making has become the exclusive domain of pastors (and missionaries). Salesmen sell, insurance agents insure, and ministers minister. At least, that's the way it works in most of our churches. While it's true that the pastors, elders, and apostles in the New Testament made disciples, we can't overlook the fact that discipleship was everyone's job. The members of the early church took their responsibility to make disciples very seriously. To them, the church wasn't a corporation run by a CEO. Rather, they compared the church to a body that functions properly only when every member is doing its part. Paul explained the function of the church in

Ephesians 4:11–16:

He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ... we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Paul saw the church as a community of redeemed people in which each person is actively involved in doing the work of ministry. The pastor is not the minister—at least not in the way we typically think of a minister. The pastor is the equipper, and every member of the church is a minister. The implications are huge. Don't think of this as merely a theological issue. See yourself in this passage. Paul said that your job is to do the work of ministry! Jesus commanded you to make disciples! Most Christians can give a number of reasons why they cannot or should not disciple other people: "I don't feel called to minister." "I just have too much on my plate right now; I don't have time to invest in other people." "I don't know enough." "I have too many issues of my own. I'll start once I get my life in order." As convincing as these excuses may seem to us, Jesus's commands don't come with exception clauses. He doesn't tell us to follow unless we're busy. He doesn't call us to love our neighbors unless we don't feel prepared. In fact, if you read Luke 9:57–62, you'll see several individuals who gave excuses for why they couldn't follow Jesus at the time. Read the passage and take note of how Jesus responded to them. It may surprise you. God made you the way you are; He has provided and will continue to provide you with everything you need to accomplish the task. Jesus commands you to look at the people around you and start making them into disciples. Obviously, only God can change people's hearts and make them want to become followers. We just have to be obedient in making the effort to teach them, even though we still have plenty to learn ourselves.

Q5 What excuses tend to keep you from following Jesus's command to make disciples? What do you need to do in order to move past these excuses?

Taking the First Step

Being a disciple maker means that you will begin to look at the people in your life differently. Every person in your life is created in the image of God, and Jesus commands every one of them to follow Him. God has placed these people in your life so that you will do everything you can to influence them. Following Jesus means that you will be teaching other people to follow Jesus. Take some time to consider your first step toward disciple making. Whom has God placed in your life that you can teach to follow Jesus? Maybe God is laying someone on your heart you don't know very well. Your first step could be building a relationship with that person. Maybe it's someone you've known for years, and God is calling you to take that relationship to another level. God has placed you where you are, and the people around you are not there by accident. Keep in mind that the Great Commission calls us to every type of person, to those inside of the church as well as to those outside, to those who are like us and those who are very different. Everyone needs to understand who Jesus is and what it means to follow Him.

Q6 Whom has God placed in your life right now that you can begin making into a disciple of Jesus Christ?

Working Together to Make Disciples

God wants you to view the other Christians in your life as partners in ministry. God has not called you to make disciples in isolation; He has placed you in the context of a church body so that you can be encouraged and challenged by the people around you. And you are called to encourage and challenge them in return. As you begin this study, think about how you will proceed. Are there Christians in your life you can study this material with? Are there mature believers you can approach with the questions that will inevitably arise? The goal is for you to think through this material and let these truths saturate your mind, heart, and lifestyle. But you'll get a lot more out of this if you have other people to talk with, be challenged by, and work together with. Human beings are simply not designed to function in isolation.

Q7 Whom has God placed in your life for you to partner with in making disciples?

Q8 Spend some time praying that God will make you into a committed and effective disciple maker. Confess any feelings of unpreparedness and insecurity. Ask Him to empower you for the ministry He is calling you to. Ask Him to lead you to the right people to partner with and the right people to begin discipling.