

Biblical Foundation for Making Disciples of Every People

Introduction

Making disciples of every people is a direct command from Christ. It is to be our first priority not because it was Jesus' last command, but because it is first and foremost His highest priority! It is central to what through the ages has become known as "The Great Commission" – those five post-resurrection statements of Jesus passed on to us through the disciples.

In the days following His resurrection, Jesus met with His disciples on several different occasions. You'll recall reading in the Gospels about Him meeting them in a room in Jerusalem, on a mountainside in Galilee, by the Sea of Galilee, and on the slopes of the Mount of Olives. He met with His disciples at several different times and in a variety of places in order that He might impart to them final instructions that were crucially important to Him.

To be sure, during His post-resurrection appearances Jesus passed along other information to His disciples as well. But His final days with them was bookended with instruction about the up-coming worldwide mission they were to inaugurate. He first told them about it on the evening of Resurrection Day. He last instructed them in it 40 days later, just moments before His glorious Ascension.

One of the most common mistakes made when reading through the Gospels is to treat these instructions as though they were synoptic. Upon examination of the contexts and settings where Jesus conveyed them, it becomes apparent that Jesus gave these mission statements on five different occasions, in five different addresses, at five different geographical settings, with five different emphases.

That being so, it becomes evident that these statements are sequential rather than synoptic, and incremental in adding more and more information. Chronologically, Jesus gave them in an order much different from the biblical order if one starts reading beginning with Matthew. Noting the contexts surrounding these passages reveals the true order in which they were given.

On the evening of resurrection day, Jesus met with ten distraught disciples in a room somewhere in Jerusalem (Jn. 20:19). For reasons we do not know, Thomas was absent and Judas was dead, making only ten disciples present. At that meeting found in John 20:21, Jesus gave the Model for Mission, when he said, "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."

Eight days later when Thomas was present (Jn. 20:26), Jesus gave to the eleven disciples the added information of Mark 16:15. Here we see the Magnitude of the Mission, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation."

About a week or so following that, He met with all eleven disciples a third time, after they had walked to Galilee to meet with Him on a mountain. It was there that Jesus gave the most detailed of the commissions, recorded in Matthew 28:18-20, where He conveyed the Methodology for Mission centered on the phrase, "make disciples of all peoples." We will get back to that phrase in a moment.

Approximately a week later on the eve of His ascension after the disciples had made their way back to Jerusalem, Jesus gave the commission found in Luke 24: 44-49. Here He makes clear what the Message of Mission they are to proclaim is, by the succinct phrase, "repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed in my name, beginning in Jerusalem."

Finally, possibly after an interval of only a few short hours, Jesus led His disciples out of the city to

the Mount of Olives (Acts 1: 11). There He gave His farewell mission statement recorded in Acts 1:8, mentioning the Means of Missions, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

The model, the magnitude, the methodology, the message and the means of mission. All five were important to Jesus and are important to us today in our understanding of the biblical foundation for making disciples of every people.

“Make Disciples of All Peoples”

Let us now return to Matthew 28:18-20, where the command “make disciples of all peoples” is found. Jesus said it this way:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all peoples, 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.”

A very important principle stands out from this instruction: the making of disciples is more than just the making of converts. Our mission is not complete when a person gives a simple assent to the gospel message. The raising of a hand, the walking of an aisle, an uttering of a sinner’s prayer while a start, is not the culmination of the task. It is only the beginning. Granted, the good news is shared, and it is believed, but the mission doesn’t stop there. Evangelism initiates the process of a person becoming a consistent follower of the Savior in whom they now believe. But this is not the full picture of making of disciples or even “discipleship” as some put it.

Making disciples is the process where mature believers build personal relationships with new believers for the purpose of producing growing and competent followers of Jesus. The process develops over a period of time and demands the context of nurturing.

Producing authentic, lifelong followers of Jesus is thus the goal of making disciples. These individuals evidence their genuineness in the faith by their progress in spiritual maturity that in turn transforms their beliefs, behavior and worldview. Thus I suggest an appropriate definition of a disciple to be:

A consistent lifelong follower of Christ whose life is progressively being transformed into the image of Christ’s. He joyfully walks with Christ, is constantly being informed by Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit and other believers, with the chief end of glorifying God.

The making of a disciple then becomes a path rather than an achievement. Jesus’ disciples understood firsthand what this discipleship process entailed. Over the past three years Jesus had lived with them, walked with them and told stories to them. They followed after Him and fellowshiped with Him as everyday experiences became lessons on loving God, loving others, and denying self. Thus they would have intuitively understood that all He had modeled to them, they were to likewise do for others.

The three essentials of disciple making

Furthermore, we recognize that the depth of the task contains three essentials that comprise legitimate aspects of discipling peoples (Mt. 28:19-20): First, by reaching out - going to those who have little or no exposure to the gospel.

Second, by bringing in - by gathering them into a relationship with Jesus and other believers that is evident by the outward sign of baptism.

Third, by changing over - by teaching them to observe His commands, which in turn would change their former worldview and moral conduct, resulting in a transformed life.

It is important that we examine these three essentials of making disciples a little more in depth.

1. First essential: Reaching out: “Go”

The first essential in making disciples is to go out and encounter those who are not yet Christ followers. They may not yet be Christ followers because they have not yet had the opportunity to hear about Christ! Placed first in the sentence it shows this is the first step in making disciples. It shows the duty of believers to take the gospel from where it is known and believed to where it is not known nor believed, to penetrate into every people group on earth.

2. Second essential: Bringing in: “Baptizing them”

This is the task of gathering new believers into a relationship with Jesus and other believers, which is evidenced by the identifying rite of baptism. Jesus doesn't mean the practice of baptism as a magical rite that automatically brings people into relationship with God without a change of heart. Sadly, it has deteriorated into that very thing in some church traditions. Rather baptism is the culmination of the consolidation process of the repent-believe-baptize experience of salvation.

This public symbol of initiation is very meaningful for the believer. It is a picture of beginning a new life in Christ and of allegiance to Him and to His church. The ordinance is a powerful outward expression of a new identity and a changed life within. Indeed because of these implications, there are new believers in some hostile cultures who delay its application for fear of repercussion. Antagonistic nonbelievers understand its powerful significance!

That believers are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit demonstrates the believer's new relationship with the triune God. The names of the three persons of the Trinity are invoked in baptism to show the significance of all three in the salvation experience. God the Father is the author of grace, Jesus the provider of grace and the Holy Spirit the applicator of grace. The three work together in harmony to bring lost souls to the place of redemption. This Christian rite rightfully recognizes all three persons of the Godhead, and teaches the new believer that this is the God who now is to have their allegiance. Baptism then pictures all that is implied when a person repents of sin, believes in Christ and is placed into the fellowship of believers.

3. Third essential: Changing over: “Teaching them to obey”

The making of a disciple does not stop with the initial belief experience nor the subsequent initiation experience. There is an educational process that follows to keep the new Christ-follower learning and growing in his/her new faith. Some today would equate this with “spiritual formation.” Whatever the label, the important thing is that there be an on-going growth experience. A new believer's worldview must be changed; his lifestyle adjusted to increasingly conform to the image of Christ; and his ethical conduct increasingly marked by integrity. When transformation is apparent in these areas, that believer in turn is in a position to teach others also and thus duplicate the process.

Teaching has a final goal – obedience so that transformation is experienced! New believers are taught with the goal that they become obedient followers of all Christ commanded. Among other things that Jesus taught, they are to live out the great commandment (Mat. 22:37-40) and show great compassion (Mat. 9:36). It takes growth experiences in community with other believers for that to be most effective.

This is why believers are congregated into local churches (and why some have labeled this passage the “church planting” commission). This is why missionaries have established Bible schools and seminaries the world over. This is why seminars, webinars, church based training and a host of other teaching ministries are so important. Growth happens best in the presence of other believers. It is the local church that best facilitates the fellowship of believers. Thus by implication the establishment of local congregations is an outcome of the making disciples.

Superficial or genuine outcomes?

Thus, all three activities – going, baptizing, teaching – are essential components of making disciples of every people. When done correctly, lives are genuinely changed for the better. This is the ultimate

objective of making disciples – the transformation of lives. Transformed lives in turn transform communities, cultures and even whole countries.

However the lack of genuine changed lives has become the greatest omission of the Great Commission the world over! All too often “proselytes” are made instead of “disciples.” When this happens churches get filled with bodies who exhibit little evidence of changed beliefs and behaviors. This results in spiritually apathetic “believers” who quickly deteriorate into dysfunctional gatherings or become nominal Christians. They become victims of aberrant doctrine, heresy and deviant cults. Although they wear the label “Christian” many are not Christ-followers at all. They are superficial followers of “the way” in need of a conversion experience.

This sad state has become the bane of the Church the world over. It causes skepticism when it comes to the validity of certain ministry reports. Although it is common to read reports about myriads of conversions and prolific church planting movements, what is the value of those reports if they do not evidence the bearing of the fruit of transformed lives? Superficial conversions and inflated statistics only promote non-authentic outcomes.

Therefore, it is incumbent on God’s messengers to engage in these three essential processes of making disciples. Taken together, they have the transformation of lives as the final goal. Only then are people genuinely disciples of Christ. Only then is the intended outcome of “making disciples” achieved among all people groups. Only then will sinful societies, corrupt cultures and degraded communities be transformed for the better.

Conclusion

Just how best to make disciples has never been universally uniform nor has a predominant strategy been agreed upon. And that is good.

Given the varied cultural contexts in which the gospel is being proclaimed, making disciples could not be squeezed into a one-fits-all straight jacket. It is rightfully varied in methodology by Spirit-driven and creative believers the world over. What works best in one culture does not mean it can be uncritically transferred to another. Each cultural setting demands its own unique disciple-making application. However, it has been universally proven that the best place for making disciples to happen is in conjunction with the local church.

Thus the task before us remains large, but not undoable. Penetrating, consolidating and transforming every people group remains our highest priority, too! By utilizing the opportunities and resources God has entrusted to us and by the means of prayer and the Holy Spirit, this generation has the ability to disciple every remaining people group. We can make disciples of every people in this generation - if we have the will to do so!