

Making Disciples

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Why are Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18-20 called 'The Great Commission'? Well the 'Commission' part is easy. This is a charge Jesus gave to His disciples to continue His mission on earth - to "go and make disciples." But, why is it called the 'Great' Commission?

Perhaps it's great because of it's significance. Jesus gave these instructions out of His full vestment of authority which would make them very important. Perhaps it's great because it's so comprehensive. Disciples are to be made of "all" nations. Disciples are to be taught "everything" Jesus taught the first disciples. That means taking people from salvation to becoming fully devoted, empowered and equipped disciples of Jesus and we are commissioned to do this until the "very end of this age." Jesus promises to be with us as we make disciples until this earthly kingdom comes to an end. This commission was not just given to the early church pioneers. This directive and purpose statement for the Church did not have a 'use-by date' in this life. While ever there are humans walking this earth, the disciples of Jesus are commissioned to "make disciples of all nations".

Perhaps it's also great because it permeates all facets of our lives. The command to "go" and make disciples suggests that it's something that is a part of our everyday lives as individuals. In fact, when I study the Greek word first used here, which we translate 'go' in English, the more accurate meaning of the word is "*in your going*." This is a really important distinction and one which we should never have lost in translation.

Making disciples was never meant to be seen as a specific activity or task Jesus assigned to the Church. Making disciples was meant to be part of our very life and purpose as human beings under God. Making disciples was meant to be the focus and ultimate goal of every ministry we operate in Jesus' name in the Church.

So the Great Commission should more accurately be translated, "*In your going ... make disciples*." That is, in the normal course of your life, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in whatever you do with your life, and especially what you do in the Church, make disciples! Being a disciple of Jesus and making disciples of Jesus is, in the final analysis, the primary calling of every one of us who claims to belong to Jesus.

In our times together in worship on a Sunday we worship God as a community, we hear God's word in Scripture, in song and in preaching, we share fellowship together – all of these things are really great, but if the final outcome and goal is not making disciples, who can make disciples ... we don't understand the commission Jesus gave us.

Messy Church is a new and exiting way of bringing children and their families under the sound of the gospel and into the presence of Christ, but if the only time we see these people is once a month in an action-packed, activity-based program ... we will never make disciples.

The Red Dove Cafe is a wonderful front-line ministry of our Church but unless we, the people of God in this church, either as volunteers on the team or customers dropping in now and then, if we don't connect with the people who come in those doors and build relationships with them over time, then we will never make disciples and the Red Dove will be just another cafe in Lismore, not a powerful tool in Jesus' hand to fulfil His mission on earth.

The Lismore Regional Mission Food Pantry is one of the most exciting and potentially life-changing ministries operating under this roof. But again, unless we, the people of God, the Church which bears the name of Christ, unless we embrace that ministry personally by praying for it every week, by encouraging the leaders and volunteers in the awesome work they do, by joining the team as a worker or by dropping in and talking with the 60+ unbelievers God brings to us every week - without that intentional ministry, we just have another welfare program which happens to operate in a Church building.

Providing welfare is not the primary calling of the Church which Jesus is building. We are called and commissioned by Jesus to make disciples. That is our primary calling. Now if we can help people make ends meet at the same time, that is a wonderful blessing and very often that becomes the open door for us to tell them our story, Christ's story, the story of life as they were always meant to live it – as a redeemed, loved, restored child of God.

Tragically, I believe the priority of discipleship in the Church of Jesus Christ - the One Who gave us this great commission, has been at an all time low for many, many years now. In fact, even growing up in the Church decades ago, I can't remember hearing the term 'discipleship' very much. I can't remember hearing many sermons about the priority of making disciples. I heard a lot of sermons about sharing the gospel. *Evangelism* was the word everyone was focussed on in the 70's & 80's.

So for me and most of my peers I think 'making disciples' simply meant making converts - leading 'non-Christians' or 'the unchurched' to Jesus. In fact, evangelism was so strongly emphasized, the Great Commission became a rallying cry to convert and baptize people, rather than to disciple them. It was as though The Great Commission only read: "*Go and baptize all nations in the name of the Father, and of Son and of the Holy Spirit.*"

How could this disregard for making disciples develop when the entire focus of Jesus' earthly ministry was discipleship? Jesus spent three years, day and night, making disciples and teaching those disciples how to make other disciples who then taught other disciples to do the same.

Evangelism is all about making 'converts' - getting people to embrace the gospel and Christ's free gift of salvation. Evangelism is an essential pre-requisite to making disciples. You can't become a disciple if you're not even a believer. But that 'conversion' from being a non-believer to a believer is a one-off experience in a person's life and it's not even our job – only the Holy Spirit can open someone's heart to the truth.

By contrast, becoming a *disciple* of Jesus and embracing His disciple-making mission on earth, is a life-time journey and the core purpose of the Church. Jesus never talked about making converts. His whole ministry and His teaching was, and is, about making disciples. In fact, the only time Jesus even uses the word 'convert' is during His monumental dressing down of the Pharisees, the Senior Pastors of the day, when He rebuked them for producing knowledge-filled machines, full of pride and void of love. This is what He says:

"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are." (Matthew 23:15)

Harsh words from Jesus - but He knew the difference between making *converts* and making *disciples*. He knew the difference between filling auditoriums every week with converts as we build a works-based religious institution – and making disciples across the community and releasing the Church that Jesus promised to build.

Converts alone are not disciples. Converts follow doctrines and denominations. Disciples follow the life and teachings of Jesus and are empowered by Jesus.

Converts *attend* church. Disciples *are* the Church.

Converts are filled with knowledge and information about Christ and His creation. Disciples are filled with the love and presence of Christ Himself.

Converts know about Jesus. Disciples actually know Jesus personally.

Converts only know the free gift of salvation in Christ, they know nothing of the cost of discipleship as we fulfil the mission of Christ.

Converts measure growth externally using tangible things like church attendance, good works and the level of activity which is happening in the Church. Disciples measure growth internally using variables more difficult to measure like intimacy with God, the fruit of the Spirit and growth in personal character as we are transformed over time.

This explains why Jesus didn't *convert* people. Jesus *discipled* those whom the Holy Spirit 'converted.' Once their spiritual eyes were opened by the Spirit of God, Jesus gave them His teaching, His power, His friendship, His time, His heart and His life. Such was the model Jesus expected His church would embrace when He uttered these now famous words in Matthew 28. So if making disciples, not converts is our primary purpose as Christ's Church, we should make sure we understand the difference.

Salvation costs us nothing - Discipleship may cost us everything - Here is the troublesome thing about our infatuation with evangelism throughout the latter part of the twentieth century. Getting people to a point of accepting the truth about Jesus and receiving His free gift of salvation was relatively easy in the 1960's through to the 1980's. The whole Billy Graham crusade era proved that. We put a popular, respected, gifted evangelist in front of a stadium full of people a few thousand times around the world and we saw three decades of phenomenal growth in terms of the number of 'converts' to the Christian faith. Walking to the altar, praying 'the sinner's prayer,' signing a 'decision card' and becoming a notch on a preacher's 'salvation belt' is how hundreds of thousands of people 'came to Christ.' But what then?

What about the hard sayings of Jesus, the stuff about carrying a cross and leaving everything behind – even choosing Christ over our family if necessary. Enduring suffering in His name and even death. Those things don't come into play when we are just making converts.

Salvation is free. It costs us absolutely nothing. Our salvation in Christ is by grace alone and we embrace that by faith, which is also a gift from God. Discipleship, however, costs us everything. It's a life modelled after Jesus. It's a journey paved with sacrifice, radical love, and suffering is part of that journey.

That message doesn't rest well with our culture. Could it be that discipleship isn't a priority in the modern church because it takes too long and requires too much from us? Could it be that our love of numbers and attendance patterns and success in worldly terms has driven the Great Commission right out of the church?

I think we emphasize salvation because it's tangible. How many people were baptized last year? How many people accepted Jesus today? Great, the church is growing – or so we think. Discipleship, however, is more difficult to measure, primarily because it's a journey, a process, an orientation, a developing relationship with Jesus which is always changing and growing or it's not real. It is not a destination or a task to complete or a target to reach or a goal to achieve in a certain time frame.

Rather than encouraging would-be converts to commit to becoming a disciple of Jesus, we ask them to get baptized or raise a hand so we can count the number of people who 'were saved' in our rally or our meeting or our outreach program.

One man who understood the cost of true discipleship was Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he awaited execution by the Nazis at the end of World War II. It was Bonhoeffer who said, "*Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.*" Let's read a longer quote from this incredible man who can teach us so much about what it means to be a disciple.

"The life of discipleship can only be maintained so long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves – neither the law, nor personal piety, nor even the world. The disciple always looks only to Christ, never to Christ and the law, Christ and religion, Christ and the world. A disciple avoids all such notions like the plague. Only by following Christ alone can we preserve a single eye. Our eye rests wholly on the light that comes from Christ, and has no darkness or ambiguity in it.

As the eye must be single, clear and pure in order to keep light in the body, as hand and foot can receive light from no other source save the eye, as the foot stumbles and the hand misses its mark when the eye is dim, as the whole body is in darkness when the eye is blind; so the follower of Christ is in the light only so long as he looks simply to Christ and at nothing else in the world.

Thus the heart of the disciple must be set upon Christ alone. If the eye sees an object which is not there, the whole body is deceived. If the heart is devoted to the mirage of the world, to the creature instead of the Creator, the disciple is lost."

Salvation is an invitation to join the team and pull on the team jersey which proudly displays that we belong to 'Team Jesus.' Discipleship, however, is an invitation to actually get on the field. Jesus is not looking for cheerleaders on the sideline, spectators in the grandstands or remote viewers in the comfort of their lounge rooms.

Jesus is looking for team members on the field. True disciples making more disciples – that's who's in Jesus' real team – the rest of us are just spectators or commentators who pretend to be part of the Mission of Christ.

Discipleship is not a program - Authentic discipleship, the kind Jesus modelled, is organic. It can't be microwaved, programmed, or packaged into a 'New Christians 101' seminar. To the extent that people around you think, act, and believe like you is the extent that your church is producing converts, not disciples. When discipleship becomes program-focused, the result is men and women who know a lot, think alike and agree on certain doctrines but few who actually live like Christ or, more accurately, live in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. Knowledge is an important component of discipleship, but when it becomes the only component, the result is almost always rule-based, life-sucking religion – not true Christianity – and certainly not discipleship.

Discipleship is intentional, relational, and transparent. Yes, discipleship involves teaching, but it's much more. It's about you inviting (or being invited) to share your life, share your story. It's about showing someone how Jesus affects every area of your life. Discipleship requires inviting people into our lives, sharing our joys and sorrows, our highs and lows. Letting them see what living 'in Christ' looks like Monday to Saturday, not just Sunday.

Discipleship doesn't require perfection. It does, however, require your life to be shaped by Jesus. Are you the same person at home that you are at the office, in a public gathering or in a Church meeting or worship service? Does the person your peers see every day line up with the person you see in the mirror you are deep inside?

You cannot be a disciple without an authentic, deepening relationship with Jesus. To make disciples, you must also build authentic relationships with those you wish to disciple. There's no short cut – no crash course or easy fix. Jesus spent three years discipling just a handful of people, morning, noon and night. There's no quick way to do what Jesus calls us to do.

Being a disciple and making disciples are not optional extras to the Christian life - Somehow, we lost sight of this truth as we powered through into this contemporary, 'enlightened,' 'progressive' 21st century culture. The radical nature of discipleship has been watered down to little more than church attendance and the occasional tithe, and most people don't even tithe anymore.

The Great Commission no longer defines the very reason we live and move and have our being as the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. Making disciples is no longer our highest calling and deepest passion. Even being a disciple ourselves appears to have fallen out of favour in so many churches.

When we hear stories of radical Christians like Bonhoeffer sacrificing everything for Christ and for those who don't know Christ yet, there we are on the sidelines applauding their passion, their commitment and their deep sense of call and mission, while silently thinking, *"I'm sure glad God never called me to do that."* Well, actually, He did.

If you are a Christian, you are called to be a disciple. The longer you follow Jesus, the more your life should be lived in Him, for Him and through Him. As that happens you should be naturally bringing others along, showing them what it looks like to live in Christ. Devoting our lives to making disciples was never supposed to be an upgrade option for being a Christian. It's not just for the 'Jesus freaks.' It's for everyone who bears the name of Christ. This is how true disciples live.

When discussing discipleship, I often hear, *"You don't know how many people you've impacted and you'll never know."* Maybe that's fair. Our lives reveal the glory of God (at least, they should). But living in the footsteps of Jesus doesn't mean you are automatically discipling others.

Discipleship is intentional – it is a deliberate choice to invest time in a few people. This is the model of Jesus. He didn't just travel from town to town, trusting His good deeds to be enough to accomplish his mission. He invested a large chunk of His life in just twelve people.

I think Jesus knew something we really need to grasp. Hit-and-miss, inconsistent exposure to Jesus isn't sufficient to build deep roots of faith. Sunday morning worship isn't enough. We need community. We need mature Christians investing time in us and the next generation needs us to invest time in them. The world needs to see how our faith sustains us and how Jesus informs every area of our lives.

Christianity won't survive and the Church won't grow with an occasional, sometimes accidental exposure to Jesus. It needs men, women and young people who are consistently, intentionally connected to Jesus. The only way the Church can ever grow and regain it's 'salt and light' influence on society is for us to accept the call to *be* disciples and *make* disciples. If that is not our intention, it simply won't happen.

Discipleship is about 'being' more than 'doing' - I love the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:38-42. In many ways, it's my story. Of course, I'm Martha. Too often, like Martha, I'm distracted by serving. I believe my greatest gift to Jesus is my service and my kingdom-building efforts. Now to those of us who show by our actions that what we do matters more than who we are, I believe Jesus is saying to us what He said to Martha, *"You are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary ... sit at my feet and listen to me ..."*

That's not very productive, Jesus. There's work to do. Who's going to plan worship for Sunday? *"Just sit at my feet."* But, Jesus. I need to write this letter, prepare this report, meet with this committee. What about all the emails I haven't answered? *"Just sit at my feet."*

No matter how many pressing activities on the schedule, Jesus' response is the same. Discipleship is about being, not doing. It's about becoming, not building. Many of God's people have a lot on their schedules. We are doing great things for God. Praise God for all that we do in His name! But, until we realize that Jesus values our presence more than our service, we'll continue to teeter on the edge of burn-out, riding a spiritual roller coaster between *"I'm on fire for God"* and *"I can't do this another day."* Jesus wants us, not us plus our gifts and accomplishments and achievements. Until we value sitting at the feet of Jesus more than serving Him and His people, we will not understand what it is to be a disciple and that means we will never be able to make other disciples and fulfil the whole purpose of the Church.

When Jesus said, *"I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."* (Matthew 16:18), He was not thinking about converts, He was thinking about disciples – just like the ones into whom He had invested so much of His life. Jesus doesn't call us to be converts or to win converts. Jesus calls us to make disciples.

Christianity is not a belief system. Christianity is not a religion. Christianity is not a lifestyle. Christianity is a life transformed by Jesus – and that life is used by Jesus to transform another life and another life and another life until our whole city and our whole nation is transformed by the power and presence of Christ - one disciple at a time.

If everything we do and everything we are as a community of believers does not flow into or out of our primary commitment to make disciples, we are not part of the Church which Jesus is building and the gates of hell will continue to prevail against us and the institution we build - until we understand that making disciples was, is and always will be, the mission of Christ, and we have no other mission. The Church which Jesus is building is a Church of disciples who are making disciples!

So come, build your Church, Lord!