

Wolverine State Congress of Christian Education

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"Are We Still Making Disciples?"

Presenter

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In giving The Great Commission to His disciples (Matthew 28:19-20), Jesus establishes the purpose of the church. It's not to make larger buildings, it's not to establish the best praise team in town, and it's not to show off the best sermons that we possibly can. While people can fulfill their individual purposes in participating in these activities and ministries, the church itself has one purpose: Make disciples.¹

This is the call of the church, and it should be our function and our mission. This goal can be accomplished through various methods, but the end result must be singular. If we aren't making disciples, we should question why we're opening the doors each weekend.²

"Ultimately each church will be evaluated by only one thing, its disciples. Your church is only as good as its disciples. It does not matter how good your praise, preaching, programs or property are. If your disciples are passive, needy, consumerist, and not moving in the direction of radical obedience, your church is not good." – Neil Cole

"God's primary plan for the Church is for disciples of Jesus to develop other men and women into disciples! There is probably no other more primary matter of negligence in the Church today than our failure to follow the Lord's command to develop disciples. Because of this gross neglect, many Christians think of themselves as an audience to be entertained rather than an army ready to march...Discipleship must function as the heart of church ministry."³

We have majored in the inadequate process of making members and minored in the Christ-given mandate of making disciples for Him. Many times we have succumbed to the law of institutional self-preservation and made members, which are at best disciples of the institutional church and little more. At other times, we have fed the insatiable appetite of ravenous egos of some in the pulpit, turning some of our churches into personality cults. These personality cults go way beyond the biblical mandate to hold the pastor in high esteem. They make the pastor their center of worship, becoming fanatical disciples of the pastor

instead of fervent disciples of the Prince of Peace. Our commanded task is to make disciples for Christ.

A disciple is more than a fan or an admirer. There are many people in our churches who are ardent fans of Christ but not disciples of Christ. Fans of Christ are enthusiastic in their outward worship but weak in their daily walk. They are spirited spectators of the Christ but not spiritual subjects of the Christ. "In Greek usage, *disciple* denotes an indissoluble personal relationship between disciple and teacher (*didaskalos*) in which the disciple imitates or emulates the teacher. This relationship occurs whether the learning and teaching involve technical or academic learning or the learning of a skill. The word is also used to denote an inner fellowship between disciple and teacher as well as the practical effects of that fellowship."⁴ To be a disciple of Christ is to allow Him to call and set the cadence for your life, thereby causing you to be in step with the Spirit. This being in step with the spirit is what the Apostle Paul calls "walking in the Spirit."

By definition, a disciple is a follower, one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another. A Christian disciple is a person who accepts and assists in the spreading of the good news of Jesus Christ. Christian discipleship is the process by which disciples grow in the Lord Jesus Christ and are equipped by the Holy Spirit, who resides in our hearts, to overcome the pressures and trials of this present life and become more and more Christlike. Discipleship is not knowing more information about Jesus, but knowing Jesus and being transformed into His image through the constant exposure of the Gospel of grace. Discipleship calls us to live by faith in Him in the everydayness of life by the Holy Spirit's power. This process requires believers to respond to the Holy Spirit's prompting to examine their thoughts, words, and actions and compare them with the Word of God. This requires that we be in the Word daily—studying it, praying over it, and obeying it. Also, we should always be ready to give testimony of the reason for the hope that is within us (1 Peter 3:15) and to disciple others to walk in His way.

To make disciples for Christ is to lead people to accept a paradigm shift informed, better yet, shaped by Christ. "A paradigm is a conscious or unconscious structure of thought, belief and action. A paradigm shift is a change within this structure that results in the ability to perceive and consider things differently and thus to respond in a radically new or different manner."⁵ Every human being has need of this change, this shift. No one comes here automatically a disciple. Before a person comes to become a Christian, his default paradigm is rooted in the world (*kosmos*). The *kosmos* is diametrically opposed to God, His Word, His will, and His way. Therefore, a shift is needed. This shift is not one of mere reformation but a real shift due to transformation. Paul, the apostle speaks of this in 2nd Corinthians 5:17. Notice what he says: "This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!" (2 Corinthians 5:17, NLT) Far too many people in our churches have the look of a Christian (reformation) and not the life of a Christian (transformation). The outcome of discipleship is to have people whose thoughts, beliefs and actions are in alignment with the

teachings of Jesus Christ. In other words, the resultant of discipleship is to have men and women, boys and girls whose heads think the thoughts of Christ, whose hearts resonate with Christ, and whose hands are busy doing the work of Christ. In fact, the label Christian requires this. No one can truly be called Christian who does not exhibit this paradigm shift. This paradigm shift is a process and not an event, hence the "ing" of "making."

When Jesus walked this earth – He expected every person that followed Him to take it seriously. He made it clear that He wasn't interested in attracting a big crowd – just so He could brag on the numbers. Jesus wanted to transform people into sold-out, radically committed disciples.

Matthew 16:24 – "...If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

One of the main characteristics of a disciple is "sustained loyalty." At best, what we call loyalty today is nothing more than a temporary distraction that vanishes quickly. All it takes for us to move to the next thing is for this temporary distraction to become inconvenient. In the text before us, Jesus is calling His disciples to a life of "Sustained Loyalty." Jesus is calling us to a life of unswerving allegiance to Him. This call is no passing fad. Jesus is talking about commitment, not convenience, devotion not diversion. Jesus is talking about discipleship.

Let's listen in on this conversation that Jesus is having with His disciples.

"Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?" (Matthew 16:24–26, ESV)

Please note that Jesus is talking to His disciples. That seems odd. It seems odd because the text has identified them as "His disciples" and yet He is talking to them about being disciples. Why is this? Is it because merely hanging around Jesus does not make you a disciple? Yes, I think that is why. Even today Jesus has to give clarification as to what it means to be a disciple. There are many in our churches who are just hanging around Jesus, but they are not truly disciples of Jesus Christ. They hang around the choir. They hang around the usher ministry. They hang around the Sunday School. They hang around the Deacon and Trustee ministries. Some hang around the pulpit. And yes, even some hang around us in our denominational gatherings. The immediate contextual example of this need is Peter. A few verses before our chosen pericope, we find Peter taking it upon himself to pull Jesus aside and attempt to get Jesus straight.

"From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead. But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such

things. "Heaven forbid, Lord," he said. "This will never happen to you!" Jesus turned to Peter and said, "Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God's." (Matthew 16:21–23, NLT)

The news of impending adversity caused Peter to step out of his place and call the plans of Jesus into question. Hence the need for this point of clarification. The paradigm of discipleship is the same for everybody. Jesus says "if any man." This means that no matter who you are, the rules of discipleship are the same. No one has permission to come up with his or her guidelines for being a disciple. Jesus has set the template. There is no place for individual, designer versions of being a disciple.

To be a disciple, you must be willing to let Jesus lead. You must not get in front of Him, you must come after Him. We must not be like Peter and get out of our place by presuming to know what is best for Jesus and His work. Jesus had to correct Peter by telling him that he was out of place. In fact, the proper place for Peter, and anyone else who desires to be a disciple of Jesus is to get behind Jesus and let Jesus lead. To assume to lead Jesus is to behave like the devil who is always wanting to redirect the purpose and plans of the Holy.

Cross bearing is a problem for those who practice a faith of convenience and comfort. Most of us don't sign up for this brand of Christianity. Far too many of us have fallen in love with the synthetic, manmade, artificial, designer version of Christianity which is cross-less and Christ-less. We like this new version because it requires nothing of us and ultimately does nothing for us. We just don't feel that this cross bearing thing is necessary, after all, who wants to be around anybody that serious. The cross-less mindset declares that his relationship with Jesus is a private matter. It's between Jesus and me, and it is nobody's business but mine. Jesus begs to differ with such an incognito relationship. A true disciple does not hide his relationship with Jesus. A real disciple publicly identifies with Jesus even in a world that hates Jesus. The disciple that Jesus is calling for has loyalty that is sustained through ridicule and rejection. The disciple that Jesus is calling for has loyalty that is sustained through the jeering and joking from the world that is laughing prematurely. The disciple that Jesus is calling for has a loyalty that is sustained through the threat of life and even through the loss of life.

Jesus calls His disciples to follow Him! He is calling for a lifelong commitment. Jesus is calling for you and I to let Him take the lead in our lives "twenty-four seven and three hundred and sixty-five." He wants us to follow Him allowing Him to show us how to move through life. He wants us to follow Him in the good days and the bad days. He wants us to follow Him when we don't know which way to go and when we think we know the way to go. Jesus calls His disciples to follow Him into a deeper level of obedience to the Father. If we follow Him, He will show us how to say "Yes" more to the Father and say "No" more to self.

We often look at The Disciples with our Christian hindsight and assume that we would've followed Jesus just as they did, no questions asked, and yet many struggle to follow pastors that are trying to feed them straight from the Word of God. God has anointed leadership in

many places, people that have been given the mandate of equipping the saints of God for discipleship (Ephesians 4:11-16), and yet many refuse training because of pride, personal issues, or a sense that they've achieved an adequate level of discipleship.

One of the hindrances to making disciples is our lack of awareness that we don't come into the body of Christ ready-made. We must be made ready. Paul calls it the "perfecting of the saints." God has given Pastors and teachers to the church to get the ready for divine activity. This divine activity is not aimless busy work, but it is divine activity for the "work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ". We really need to grow up if we are going to be used by God to build up a living Christ-centered community called the church. The Greek word for "perfecting" is *katartismos*. You will find this definition in the Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament. *Katartismos* - to make someone completely adequate or sufficient for something—'to make adequate, to furnish completely, to cause to be fully qualified, adequacy.'⁶ – (we don't come into the body of Christ ready). This word also is used as a medical term for the setting of a broken bone. You will also find the root of this word translated as mending (as when the disciples when mending their nets). It is through discipleship that men and women, boys and girls are made ready to be a part of what the Lord wants to do with and through His church. It is the purpose of discipleship to prepare people for serving in ministry, serving to express the love of Jesus Christ. All of this is done that the body of Christ would be built up. The building up of the body has to do with the knitting of God's people together for effective work for the kingdom.

So, what is the purpose of what we're called to do? There are 3 main components to The Great Commission: Evangelism, baptism, and education.

1. Evangelism – The first thing we have to do is go! We have to reach those that haven't been reached. There's no such thing as stationary evangelism and we must cease preaching to the converted all of the time and get outside the church walls. Also, there should be no such thing as selective evangelism. Without compromising or changing God's Word, we are to spread the Gospel to ALL people! No matter their condition, their sin, their sexual orientation, their age, their race, their stage in life, or whatever else. No person is beyond the reach of the cross. Jesus died for everyone!
2. Baptism – This is an outward expression of an inward change. It is a demonstration of our regeneration as a result of our communion with Christ. We aren't saved by baptism, we're saved by confession. The water doesn't change us, we go into the water because we're already changed. Baptism signifies the old man going into the grave (submergence) and coming up (being born again) new. Jesus is our great example in all things. He was submerged and it pleased God (Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22). He commands us in The

Commission to baptize, and therefore, we must do it. After baptism, we should further equip the converted for discipleship.

3. Education – Not only should we teach new converts after baptism, but it is paramount that there be some form of teaching before baptism. We are rushing people to the baptism pool without them even knowing what baptism is about, why it's being done, and its significance in the church. Many people believe that baptism saves them. We could change this thinking with some education before submergence. Jesus said "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20). A person should be taught about what they're actually joining before they fully commit. We can't learn it all, but there should be some groundwork laid.

If there's anything that's causing the church of today to trip over its own feet, it's forgetting the real goal of evangelism and discipleship. It might surprise some to read this, but Jesus isn't concerned with church membership. He's concerned with Kingdom citizenship. It's not about where we join, it's about our residency within the Kingdom.⁷

¹ Jackson, Rev. Kelly R.. *Are We Still Making Disciples?: Pushing the Church Beyond Membership and Sunday Morning Service* (p. 1). Kindle Edition.

² Jackson, Rev. Kelly R.. *Are We Still Making Disciples?: Pushing the Church Beyond Membership and Sunday Morning Service* (p. 1). Kindle Edition.

³ Bill Hulk, *New Century Disciple-Making*, pp. 10

⁴ Michael J. Anthony et al., *Evangelical Dictionary of Christian Education*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 207.

⁵ Stanley Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 88.

⁶ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996, c1989). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament : Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (1:679). New York: United Bible societies.

⁷ Jackson, Rev. Kelly R.. *Are We Still Making Disciples?: Pushing the Church Beyond Membership and Sunday Morning Service* (p. 1). Kindle Edition.