

MAKING DISCIPLES OF JESUS: The Unique Mission of the Church

Theme: The mission of the church is one thing: making apprentices who are shaped by the formative influence of Jesus Christ.

Text: Matthew 28:18-20

Introduction: We have a crisis of mission in the church.

There is an intensive dialogue going on within the church of Jesus Christ in the Western world, meaning those areas shaped by Western civilization—the US, Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc. The conversation centers around the identity of the church. Who are we as the church of Jesus Christ? We might ask, what has precipitated this self-examination? We are going back to root issues because the church finds itself today on very different footing in our society than it once did. Up until just a generation ago for some 1600 years, the church of Jesus Christ existed in a friendly, supportive environment as a respected institution. But over the last 30 years or so the waters have become far murkier. It is now in an ambiguous setting in which the church finds itself—some supportiveness, much indifference, considerable hostility. Simply the Christian church's decline of influence tells us a whole lot.

So the question has become, who are we in this changed setting? Bill Hull has said, *"The crisis at the heart of the church is a crisis of product?"* What are we to produce? What is our unique God-assigned task that no one else is called to do? In other words, what is our mission? Every business must ask the question, what business are we in? If you can't answer that question clearly, you won't be in business very long. It is quite common today to wrestle over mission statements in order to get clarity about what business you are in. *How many of us have been on teams in the business world where we were to write a mission statement for the company or the unit you were a part of?*

The church is in crisis today because we have wandered from our core mission and we must get back to it. When I was pastoring a church in Silicon Valley near San Jose, CA during the 90's the elders and staff spent about two and half long years working through various drafts of our mission statement. I think we deforested much of Northern California with the sheer volume we produced. I look back on that effort with considerable embarrassment. Why? The mission of the church was right there before my eyes. Jesus wrote the mission statement for every local church. We didn't need to come up with it. Jesus said it about as clearly as it can be said, "Go and make disciples [of me] of all nations." We may want to put a fresh and contemporary face on that language, such as a church in Buffalo, New York, who says, *"We exist to enable ordinary people to be transformed into extraordinary followers of Christ."* For some time our version of Jesus' call to make disciples that has been our mission statement is *"glorifying*

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God by helping people grow to their God-given potential as disciples of Jesus Christ."

This morning and the next two Sundays we are going to examine the disciple-making mission of the church. What has Jesus called Christ Church of Oak Brook to become? If we are to make disciples of Jesus Christ, what does that look like here? Today, we are going back to the very marching orders of the church by examining what has been called *The Great Commission*. This is the place to begin again. George Orwell once wrote, "We have sunk to such a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first order of intelligent men." Today we restate the obvious by looking at this primary text.

Read Matthew 28:18-20 (Give background)

But before we examine the mission on which Jesus sent us, let's look at the extraordinary statement Jesus made about Himself.

Authority of Jesus (v. 18)

As a backdrop to command "Go and make disciples of all nations", Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." That is an astounding enough statement. But the language order places Jesus even more at the center if that is possible. "Given to *me* is all authority in heaven and on earth." Jesus always places himself at the center. Jesus was first in thought, last in service.

Why does Jesus state this as the backdrop to his missional instructions?

We are to accomplish his mission under His authority. Jesus is none other than the highest power in the universe. Dale Bruner puts it this way, "He means that he is the chief executive officer of the universe, in complete control of the world. He's got the whole world in His hands."

Brennan Manning, who was with in September, powerfully captures the centrality of Jesus in all things. *"If I ask myself, 'What am I doing walking around this planet? Why do I exist?' as a disciple of Jesus I must answer, 'for the sake of Jesus Christ.' If the angels ask, it is the same answer, 'we exist for the sake of Jesus Christ.' If the entire universe were suddenly to become articulate, from north to south and east to west, it would cry out in a chorus, 'we exist for the sake of Christ.' The name of Jesus would issue from the seas and mountains and valleys; it would be tapped out by the pattering rain. It would be written in the skies by the lightning. The storms would roar the name, 'Jesus*

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Christ", and the mountains would echo back. The sun on its westward march through the heavens would chant a thunderous hymn, "the whole universe is full of Christ."

Why does Jesus establish his authority before he calls us to move out?

1. As the ultimate authority he has every right to tell us what to do. "To me all authority has been given..." he says, so go... Don't just stand there, go. And our response is... "if you say so..." because we are people under authority.
2. But even more importantly Jesus states his authority as a backdrop because he wants us know that the authority under which we go is greater than any human authority who would attempt to intimidate or silence us.

What is it that He calls us to do?

Exposition of Matt. 28:19, 20

Verses 19 and 20 have a very clear structure. There is one main command: **Make Disciples**. There are three participles, which are verbal adjectives that tell us what it means to make disciples: **Go, Baptize, and Teach. Literally, you make disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching.** All three are necessary.

What is our mission?

Make disciples of Jesus: Bruner writes, *"The word pictures students sitting around a teacher—an educational process more than an evangelistic crisis, a school more than a revival. Work with people over time in an educative process of teaching Jesus."*

What is a disciple? Apparently there is confusion in the church about this. Michael Wilkins focuses the dilemma and confusion surrounding what a disciple is. He has asked people on many an occasion, *"How many of you can say, in the humble confidence of your heart, that you are a convinced you are a true disciple of Jesus Christ? Please raise your hand."* Few hands go up, hesitant, and they go down. Then he asks, *"How many of you can say, in the humble confidence of your heart, that you are convinced that you are a true Christian? Please raise your hand."* The hands go up. People are sure about being Christians, but confused as to whether they are disciples of Jesus.

How can people readily call themselves Christians yet be hesitant about identifying themselves as disciples? If we can affirm that we are Christians, yet

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be hesitant about being a disciple, it is because we look at the two from different angles. We can call ourselves Christians because it is not about the quality of our Christian life. We look at being a Christian based upon what Christ has done for us and placing our faith in Christ's completed work. We can reduce following Jesus to a *benefits plan*. Being a Christian means that we have *accepted Jesus in our hearts*. This is what Dallas Willard calls *bar-code Christianity*. All we need to do to be able to pass through the "great scanner in the sky" that says we have received the gift of eternal life. The summary of this view of being a Christian is captured by the bumper sticker: *Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven*. We say that all one needs to do is put their trust in Christ alone for their salvation and we are given a righteousness that is not our own. Yeah and Amen. That is all true.

But Jesus didn't say, "Go and make Christians who revel in the gift of eternal life." He said, "Make Disciples." Being a disciple of Jesus "*implies the existence of a personal attachment which shapes one's whole life and leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative power.*" We have made a distinction between being a Christian and being a disciple that the Bible does not make. We have reduced being a Christian to the benefits plan—forgiveness, peace and eternal life—but not conceived it as becoming apprentices of the Master. A Christian is a disciple who leaves no doubt as to who is deploying the formative influence. Who is deploying the formative influence in our life?

Jesus doesn't leave it at that, he fills in the picture. What does a disciple look like? When Jesus is deploying the formative influence what characteristics will we take on? *A disciple is one who is going, is baptized and is being taught to observe all that Jesus commanded.*

GO: Move out. Get moving.

This is the missionary task of the church. A disciple is one who shares the good news of Christ's loving gift of Himself with others.

Is there anything more anxiety producing for us as Christians than the pressure we experience to be witnesses, to tell others about Christ? Is there any aspect of the Christian life about which we feel more inept than telling others about Jesus? You might say to me, "Greg, ask me to teach Sunday School; I can do that; serve our Lord at the local homeless shelter, I can do that; be a fairly good, ethical, caring person at work, I may get a passing grade there; but share what Jesus means to me with a family member, friend, neighbor, or work associate does that ever feel awkward." Can anyone identify with these anxieties? Or am I only speaking for myself?

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Becky Pippert put into words my experience when she described her anxieties about witnessing in her early Christian days in her book, Out of the Salt Shaker and Into The World. She was laboring at that time under a view of witnessing that could be equated with *"offending people for Jesus' sake."* She had gotten the impression that witnessing was where she trapped an unsuspecting victim who was forced to listen to her speech about Jesus. With this image of witnessing she writes, *"The result was that I put off witnessing as long as possible. Whenever the guilt became too great to bear, I overpowered the nearest non-Christian with a nonstop running monologue and then dashed away thinking, 'Whew! Well, I did it. It's the Winter of 2003 and hopefully the guilt won't overcome me again until the Summer of 2004.'" The next potential victim was hoping the same.*

Some time ago I preached a message on how to reduce our anxiety when it comes to sharing the faith. In John 1:35-42 I found what I called *anxiety-reducing principles* when it comes to sharing our faith. One of those principles had to do with seeing witnessing as much about listening as talking. Evangelism is not so much about "offending people for Jesus' sake" or some kind of non-stop dump on others, but listening to the heart of a person. When Andrew and the other disciple came after Jesus, the Scripture says, "Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, "What are you looking for?"

He asked a question that probed what was below the surface. In our pop-culture society of superficiality, it seems like people aren't interested in eternal things. But I would argue that we have not listened well enough to get to those issues that lie below the surface that connect to the issues of the meaning and purpose in life. Let me share a poem with you that features listening as the connection to the sharing the gospel.

"Cold Water, Hot Coffee."

*Sometimes that cup of cold water,
turns out to be a cup of hot coffee,
and what we're asked to do is
to pour it...and to listen.
Sometimes we Christians
in our enthusiasm
think we were asked
to save the world,
when what we were asked to do
is to go into it
and tell God's story
to people in need of*

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*some good news.
Anxious activists forget
that just listening is an act
of compassion.
Driven disciples forget
that just listening is an act
of faithfulness.
Guilty givers forget
that just listening is an act
of stewardship.
Since we church people
have a tendency to be
driven and anxious and guilt-ridden
perhaps we should
read the directions again
and pour a cup of hot coffee
and listen
in His name.*

Jesus asked, "What are you looking for in me?" It will be in the listening that we hear the needs, which form the bridges for the good news of the gospel.

Go...move out...listen to the hunger of the human heart. Then you will have point of connection for good news.

BAPTIZE

Make disciples by baptizing and being baptized. A disciple is one who is baptized.

What's getting wet have to do with being a disciple? Why is baptism so central to making disciples? I don't think we go deep enough here. Baptism signifies many things: 1. Baptism is the sign of entrance into the community of faith. It is the initiation rite into the community of faith. 2. It is the confession of our faith publicly that we identify with the triune God as our God. 3. It is a symbol of washing of regeneration and forgiveness of sin. 4. It is the sign of our incorporation into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

But what Jesus has in mind here is that through baptism we enter into the life of the community and fellowship that is the triune God. Jesus literally says that we are baptized **into** the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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When I first was taught the doctrine of the Trinity in seminary it was from a dry perspective of Greek philosophy. We coldly learned to make distinctions between the persons of the God wrestling over Greek words such as *homoiousious*, was Jesus like the Father, or *homoousious*, one substance with the Father. Historically these distinctions are important for it makes a great of difference whether Jesus is like God or the same as God.

But what I missed in those distinctions was seeing the Triune God as family, community, a being in fellowship. We are first introduced to the nature of God in the book of Genesis. Interestingly enough, we find God speaking about Himself in the plural. When it came time to create human beings the formula changed from "Let there be light...and there was light" to "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness..." (Gen. 1:26) The Lord God refers to Himself in the plural, "us" and "our", yet there is a singular verb "make". I believe what this is affirming is that from all eternity, prior to God creating anything He existed as "Father, Son and Holy Spirit", three persons in One, in a loving, filial relationship. God is a being in fellowship; God is the first and perfect community. Out of this fullness of love, he created us to be brought into relationship with Himself. The German mystic, Meister Eckhart said that God created out of the laughter of the Trinity. Love seeks one upon whom to bestow love. The triune God could not keep the love to Himself. He desired an object of His love.

Let me see if I can illustrate this through our marriage. Lily and I were married in 1969. You can do the math. Therefore we were children of the 60's. Maybe some of you have heard about the era of the 60's in our country. When we got married we were not going to have children. We didn't want to be tied down. We were going to be free. After 5 years of marriage and no kids we met unwelcome inquiries about when we were going to have children with altruistic sounding cover-ups for selfishness. How can you bring another mouth feed into a hungry world; who wants to have a child live under the specter of nuclear holocaust? High sounding reasons. Yet secretly, unbeknownst to each other, we had changed our minds about having children. We both wanted someone to love who was a product of our love, but we didn't tell each other of this change of heart.

Then we suspected Lily was pregnant. Off to the doctor to confirm our suspicions. The report came back negative. We were crushed. Finally, we confessed to each other that we truly wanted to have this child. What surprised us was that even in the anticipation or suspicion of a child, our love had grown for this child of promise. Together we wanted someone on whom to bestow our love—our *together* love. Fortunately, the report was wrong and we have a 27 year old daughter to prove it, who is the love and pride of our life.

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In baptism we are being welcomed into the first family who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God from all of eternity is a being-in-fellowship, the first community. The way I see it is that the circle of the Trinity has been opened and we have been welcomed in.

What does this say about what it means to be a disciple? The church is the community who finds its identity in the fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus said it, "that they may be one, even as we are one." When we come to Christ, we join a family. Solo discipleship is an oxymoron. In the early church there was a saying, "A Christian is one who has God for his father, and the church for his mother." A disciple would not think of attempting to grow in Christ apart from the nurture of the church. *There is no discipleship apart from being fully intertwined with those who are on an intentional journey of becoming apprentices of the Master.*

Baptism is the means of *initiation* into Christ and community. Then Jesus goes on to the means of continuation.

A disciple is one who *goes, is baptized...is taught to obey all that Jesus commanded.* "Make disciples by...teaching them to obey all that I commanded you."

TEACH

What does Jesus say here? To look at the contemporary church you would think that Jesus said, "Teach them to *study* everything that I have commanded ...teach them to *hold classes* where we take notes about all that I have commanded you...teach them the *right doctrine* so that they believe the right things". That is not what Jesus said, "We make disciples by teaching them to **obey** all that I have commanded you." Do we need to study as a means to obedience, absolutely? Do we need biblical doctrine upon which to build our obedience, of course? Do we need to attend classes to increase our knowledge, you bet?" Here is the rub. Are we dedicated to the mission of teaching people to observe all that Jesus commanded? If we were serious about obedience then we might have course titles like:

- *How to Bless those who spit upon you.* Promise: At the end of this class you will actually be able to bless those who persecute you.
- How to live without purposely indulged lust or covetousness.
- How to be free of the anger that kills and all its complications

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You will recognize these as all topics that come from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' discipleship manual.

Let's look at what Jesus said here a word or phrase at a time.

Teaching...Teaching is a slow word. Disciple—take your time with people, work carefully with them, bring them along gently.

Obey...Other translations are "keep or observe". In other words, align your life in every way to the commands of Jesus. Make the structure of one's thought, the shape of one's will, the basis for our values and ambitions in life, consistent with the commands of Jesus. Come under the shaping influence of Jesus. *A disciple is one who leave no doubt as to who is deploying the shaping influence.*

All...Lest we miss the import here Jesus says literally, "**All whatever I** have commanded you." Even the hard stuff like, "Love your enemies and go good to those who persecute you", Jesus says. He means it, because this is exactly what Jesus did on the cross. The ones who did him in are the ones for whom he died. If we are to be apprentices of the Master, then we reflect the life of the Master.

This takes us back to a distinction we made earlier between being a Christian vs. being a disciple. We tend to think of a Christian as one who focuses on the benefits plan. This is abundance without obedience. We want the goodies Christianity has to offer: forgiveness, peace, eternal life without the cost of following Christ. Yet a disciple is one who has Jesus as his Master and we are lifelong apprentices.

The truth is that there is no abundance without obedience. We can't get the fullness in life without coming under the shaping influence of Jesus in all aspects of life. Jesus said it as clear as it can be said, *"He who saves his life will lose it, he who loses his life for my sake will find it."* We must give up our life to get life. The martyred missionary, Jim Elliot said, *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."*

Conclusion:

The challenge before the staff, elders and participants of Christ Church of Oak Brook is, how do we increasingly become a disciple-making church? Our crisis is no different from the crisis of most churches in the Western world. It is a crisis of product? What are we producing? How do we have laser focus on the

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one, unique mission of the church? The agenda of our day is to refocus on the mission that Jesus gave us to make disciples who are going, baptizing and teaching, all under the authority of One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. There is no more important work.

So Jesus says in conclusion, "*And look! I myself am there **with you**, all the days.*" This passage concludes where it started with Jesus at the center. "*To me all authority has been given...*" "***I myself am there with you...***" When that promise of God "*to be with you*" is used throughout Scripture it always means more than a comforting presence. Jesus' promise to be with us means that He that puts at our disposal all the power of heaven and on earth to accomplish His mission. What he calls us to, he will accomplish.

This is what gives me hope. Though the church has wandered from its prescribed mission to make disciples because we have become comfortable and flabby in our relative affluence, Jesus has no other plan than His church to accomplish His mission. He will do it.

"The call of Christ today is the same as it was when left us here to serve him 'even to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:20). We have not yet come to end of the age. That call is to be his apprentices, alive in the power of God, learning to do all he said to do, leading others into apprenticeship to him, and also teaching them how to do everything he said." (Willard, *Renovation*, p. 231)