



“Go and Make Disciples”: A Philosophy of Discipleship

There are many activities in this life that are worth doing—and not time enough to do them all. We must see that there is great danger here. If we are not careful, we may spend our whole lives doing what amounts to an eternal waste of time. As many have noted before, the enemy of the best is not the worst, but the good. With so much good to be done in the world, we must take great care that we are doing what is in fact best.

To ensure we do, we must ask an all-important question: what commission did Christ give us? That is, when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ left this earth, what task did he leave for us to finish? Of course, this is an easy question to answer—a passage of Scripture that I am sure many of us have memorized. Our commission is: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV). The principal verb in this stunning command is “make disciples”—the only verb given in the imperative mood. The other verbs, sometimes translated as imperatives, are in fact participles, giving the activities that accompany the main action. An inelegant, wooden translation might read, “Going, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey.” In other words, Christ told us to do one thing: make disciples. The rest is frosting on the cake, some of what we must do in order to make disciples effectively. For example, in order to make disciples, we must go, whether across the room or across the globe. Baptism seems to get at evangelism, the moment of conversion. And “teaching them to obey” looks more like discipleship proper, the training, education, and edification of a young believer. In any case, the focus is clear: we are told most clearly that we must be in the disciple-making business.

It is so important for us to see that this is our mandate. These are our marching orders from the King of the universe and the Lord of our souls. We cannot shirk our responsibility. We must be found

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faithful. We cannot claim to be too busy to do this, for God has said that this is what matters most to him. We cannot claim that we are not sufficiently gifted to make disciples, because Jesus promises to go with us, to empower our ministry: “And surely I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (v 20). And we cannot claim that our ministry has a “different focus” than disciple-making, because Christ asks this of every one of us. We may make disciples in different ways, we may find ourselves especially effective at one or the other end of the spectrum—evangelism or edification—but we all have the same commission. In other words, when it comes to Christ’s call on our lives, we can either make disciples or we can disobey. There is no *via tertia*. I find it hard to believe that we could hear that treasured accolade, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” if—at the end of our lives—we have not done what he asked us to do! This is our commission. This is our calling.

Having answered the question of our commission, we must now ask a related question: what is our goal? When we come to the end of our lives and look back over all that we have done and failed to do, what will have mattered most? We must steel ourselves with the tenacity of Jonathan Edwards, who at the age of eighteen resolved “that I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.”¹ We are all marching steadily towards eternity. What will we want to have done when we get there? I read once that the Bible only speaks of three eternal things: God, the Word of God, and the souls of men and women.² Now, we cannot change God or the Word of God, so if we are going to touch eternity by our lives, it must be in the arena of people. If we are not building into the people who surround us—what we may well call discipleship—we are wasting our lives. There is no way around it. Everything else we accomplish in this life will pass away eternally. This is what I mean by asking what our goal is.

We all have lots of goals in life. Think of parents for a moment. What parent do you know that does not have a whole list of goals for his children? Every parent wants his child to do well in school, to

¹ From his “Resolutions,” number 17, in *A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995): 275.

² Christopher B. Adsit, *Personal Disciplemaking* (Orlando: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1996): 17.

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have a successful career, to marry well and have lots of grandchildren to enjoy. But here is the penetrating question: if your child graduates from the very best university, becomes a rich and successful businessman, has a beautiful wife and charming kids, *but does not know Christ*, does any of it matter? That is the question. As an architect, every building you build in this life will ultimately perish; as a businessman, your company will end in oblivion; as a writer, every work of literature you pen will go up in flames. No one will read Shakespeare in heaven; no one will listen to Mozart. All that is done in this life that does not change people, that does not touch eternity, will perish. God will not care how high your stock climbed; he will not care if your child played professional sports; he will not care if my students can correctly identify onomatopoeia. He cares for your soul and the souls of those around you. This has to be our goal; this has to be our focus.

I want to make a very brief aside here. While nothing else matters if you are not under Christ, if you are, you still have a calling. We are called to steward our gifts well, and that means we should serve the Lord faithfully in whatever our calling. As Colossians 3:23 reminds us, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.” The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers teaches us that whatever we do must be done for the glory of God, whether ministry or not. Christians, because we work for the glory of God, can and should excel in every field. But—and here is the crucial difference—we understand that none of it matters apart from Christ. That has to be the top priority, the focus, the goal.

Once we have stated our goal precisely, we can ask a final question: what is our method? If all that matters is getting people to live out the gospel, how do we go about it? What concrete, practical steps can we take to make this a reality in our lives? Here we want to turn to the example of Christ for our answer. Why did Christ come to earth? Most importantly, of course, he came to glorify the Father by redeeming a people for his name. But he also came to establish his eternal kingdom through the church. So then, how does Christ establish the church? Now this is where it gets interesting. If I were Jesus, I

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would have thought that breadth would be best. The more people committed to my cause, the better. But Christ takes the opposite approach. Christ chooses depth. Rather than trying to convert thousands of followers, he devoted his time and energy to a few committed followers who could not fail him. Jesus Christ gambled the future of the church on twelve men, one of whom he chose specifically to betray him. And we are the result of that gamble! One suspects that he knew what he was doing. What was Christ's method? As Robert Coleman noted long ago, men were his method.³ Remember, before he evangelized anyone, before he preached his first public sermon, he called a few men to himself. There is infinite wisdom here. Real change—I am absolutely convinced of this—real change rarely happens except in the context of deep, personal relationships, whether one-on-one or small group. If we want to make disciples—to fulfill our commission, to reach our goal—we must take the time to build into a few people at a time.

Now I want to get very practical. For anyone interested in putting into practice the tenets we have explored today, I want to give clear advice as to how to go about it. Here are four simple steps—simple to understand, though time- and energy-consuming to carry out!—to take you down the path of discipleship.

Step one: *Choose them*. It sounds hard when you say it, but the plain fact of the matter is that we cannot possibly disciple everyone we know who needs it. At most, given our other commitments, we might be able to work with a handful of people each year. So care must be taken to select the best candidates for discipleship. You must identify those people in your life who are (1) faithful to God and his Word, (2) available to meet with you, and (3) teachable, willing to learn from you, and then invite them into the discipleship relationship. Notice that qualified—intelligent, charismatic, well-spoken, etc.—does not make the list of important characteristics, as God rarely chooses those “qualified” by the

³ *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, 30th Anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993): 27. Much of the advice in this section stems from Coleman's careful and practical analysis of the gospel stories.

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world's standards to perform his duties. (I think of Moses and Peter, for example.) Rather, he chooses men and women of faith and devotion whom he can shape into the people he needs them to be. Jesus selected twelve men from the crowds—ordinary fishermen, tax collectors, rural businessmen. But he saw in them the qualities he knew they would need to complete his mission. We must do likewise.⁴

Step two: *Love them*. Per the Master's example, the next step is spending time with the future candidates. Much of discipleship and training takes place not in formal sessions—Bible classes, Sunday sermons, or the like—but in the daily grind: seeing how to respond in difficult circumstances, watching a leader with his wife and children, grabbing a bite to eat together. The man who discipled me as a teenager knew this step well. We ate dinner together no fewer than twice weekly throughout my junior and senior years in high school. It was during this time that I saw his faith and how he lived it out. I learned much more during those times than I did when we would study a devotional together. How much do you think the disciples learned simply watching Jesus speaking to the lepers, the woman at the well, the Pharisees? An eternity's worth of truth, I am sure. This time together also cements the relationship—without which no real discipleship is possible. No doubt you have heard the old saying, "No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care." That is the truth, friends. This step provides you with the opportunity to prove to your disciple how much you care for him or her, to establish a firm foundation on which to build the rest of the discipleship relationship. I am certain that I would not have been able to speak to many of the boys I have discipled at my school about God if I had not taken the time to play soccer with them everyday at lunch first. Get out and spend time with your disciples. Take them out for ice cream. Go bowling. It doesn't matter what you do—just spend time together, develop a solid, biblical friendship, and then show them that you love them.

⁴ I hope I don't have to say it, but I will just in case: of course, you must select people of the same sex as you to disciple. Men should be discipling young men and women should be discipling young women (cf. Titus 2:1-8). Permissions: You are permitted to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way, do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and do not make more than 1000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Brandon Cooper. ©Follow After Ministries. Website: www.followafter.net. E-mail: brandon@followafter.net.



Step three: *Train them*. We all need guidance as we journey towards Christian maturity, and God has graciously provided the fellowship of believers to meet this need. Asking penetrating questions of your disciples, you will soon learn where they need support and encouragement. Many will need direction and accountability in the spiritual disciplines, especially prayer and study. Others will face difficult decisions, complicated relationships, besetting sins that require care and wisdom to address. Though hardly adequate for the task, God can and will use us—by his grace—to be instruments of grace in the lives of others, when we yield ourselves to his service.

Also, at this point we have moved into the stages of discipleship that will begin to prepare the disciple for future ministry—whether vocational or not. After all, our goal must always be to make disciples *who make disciples*. Part of training is demonstrating how to do discipleship. By discipling our disciples, we show them how discipleship works—the questions you ask, the concern you show, the importance of prayer and spending time together. By watching us, they learn how to do discipleship. (Of course, if you are trying to train your disciple in a particular aspect of ministry—leading worship, perhaps, or teaching Sunday school—you will want to work specifically in those areas.)

Then, once your disciple has started to see how the work is done, the next step is allowing him or her some freedom to do it, to practice. After the disciples had been with Christ for a period of time, he sent them out to preach among the towns of Israel. He delegated his task of preaching to them, knowing that one day they would take it over completely. Of course, part of training them to go out involves supervision when they do begin to do ministry, to make disciples. After the Twelve returned from their mission, they meet with Christ to discuss what they learned.⁵ We have a saying: “Practice makes perfect.” But really, that’s not true. The saying should be, “Practice makes permanent.” If you continue to practice the wrong way, you will never get any better. About the worst thing a teacher can do for a student is to give little or no feedback. Imagine, after giving a test, that a teacher simply handed

⁵ Luke 9:1-10. See also Luke 10:1-20, especially vv 17 and 20.



back the grades to his or her students without having shown them where they lost points. How would they ever learn what they needed to fix? Practice *with feedback* will certainly get you a lot closer to perfection. This is where real learning takes place. Your disciple should be given the opportunity to practice discipleship in a safe, controlled environment, where he or she knows help is nearby. Everyone makes mistakes; this is the time to do it, knowing that growth will take place as a result.

Step four: *Send them*. Finally, once we have taken them through the first three steps, we are ready to send our disciples out into the world to make disciples of their own. As I said above, our goal should never be just “make disciples,” but “make disciples who make disciples.” We know that Christ knew this goal well, and we are all living proof that he sent his disciples out to make new disciples. This is how the church has always grown, and this is how the church will continue to grow. Nothing will warm your heart so much as seeing your disciples catch fire for God and be unable to contain it any longer. If you build into the strong, and teach them to build into others, you will soon see fruit throughout in an exponentially increasing number of lives. At this point, you release your disciples into the world to fulfill their mandate from heaven.

Just before Christ left earth, he gave us a mission statement: “Make disciples of all nations.” He did not give this command to the Twelve or to the first generation of Christians; he gave it to all of us who are called by his name. We cannot shirk our duty simply because we are not vocational ministers, because we are too busy, or because we are worried we will not do it well. Christ has given us all a calling and a commission, and we must fulfill it. I hope you will, and I know you will see the fruit—right into eternity.