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**Theological Clarity:
Disciple-Making and the New Testament**

Robert D. Hopper

In his final instructions to his disciples, Jesus gave what has come to be called the “Great Commission” even though this title does not occur in the original language. “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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:19–20 NIV).

A. Exegetical Insight into the Term “Make Disciples”

In context, Jesus encounters the women outside the tomb (Matthew 28:9–10) where he instructs them to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. In response the disciples go to the mountain in order to meet Jesus, and once there, they see him, and worship (*proskynein*) him. The verb *proskynein* connotes the idea of submission and adoration only deserving of God. Interestingly, some or all had doubt (*distazein*), which is found only here in Matthew’s gospel. There is an intermingling of submission, yet doubt. With brevity, Matthew gets to the point and gives the Commission of Jesus. Jesus approaches and declares, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18). This is important, for Jesus is declaring that authority (*exousia*) was given (*edothē*; aorist passive) to him. It has already happened, presumably when he was resurrected. He had exercised authority while

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on earth in dealing with the natural and supernatural, but now he has full authority over all that has been, is, and is to come. He has full, unlimited, universal authority in heaven and on earth. He truly is Lord. “Therefore” (*oun*), the Commission flows out of Christ’s authority, “go” (*poreuthentes*, aorist participle), meaning as you go “and make disciples” (*matheteusate*, aorist imperative) “of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”

There are four main verbs given in the commission: go, make disciples, baptize, teach. Three are helping verbs, and one is an imperative. A quick rendering of the English text suggests that “go” is the imperative. But it is a helping verb, (*poreuthentes*), yet an important one because it is directly related to “make disciples,” (*matheteusate*). meaning that as you go about living your life, the task is clear, make disciples. The verb “go” serves to heighten the importance of the task. The idea is, you will be going about and as you do, be ever vigilant in your efforts to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Thus, the imperative is “make disciples.” You do that by baptism, which enrolls them officially, and teaching them the ways of the Master Jesus, and challenging them to obey his teachings regardless of personal inconvenience or consequence. It is a radical conversion and maturing that is required of all who want to become disciples of Jesus. These eleven are to go and proclaim the Lordship of Jesus. He has all authority. Thus, the gospel is a proclamation of Lordship. All who respond must submit to his Lordship, declaring allegiance to him exclusively. Therefore, the passage speaks to the subject of conversion to Christ and the maturing of that relationship. To make a disciple, or to be a disciple in the New Testament sense is to focus on both conversion and maturing; or to put it in the terms of Donald McGavran “to disciple” and “to perfect.” However, no division of concepts can be made and remain true to the text and its context. McGavran is sensitive to this.

In the *Church Growth Bulletin* McGavran wrote an article “How About That New Verb, To Disciple.” He says the word “disciple” can be used in three ways which needs to be explained by the one

using the term, otherwise confusion will occur. These three terms are known as D 1, D 2, and D 3:

- D1 “the movement of a non-Christian society under the influence of the Holy Spirit so that large numbers of its members become baptized and committed Christians.”
- D2 “the initial conversion of individuals in a nominally Christian society.”
- D3 “the latter stages of the process by which an individual Christian becomes an informed, illuminated, thoroughly dedicated follower of Jesus Christ.”¹

However, McGavran is biased toward conversion as the primary emphasis of “make disciples,” definitions one and two. This affinity for concentrating on conversion as the primary ingredient in the Great Commission may be understood in the light of the fact that McGavran is attempting to stir the Church universal into action. This necessitates an over emphasis on that aspect the Church has been neglectful in heeding. But a theology of conversion is not what McGavran is insisting on, rather disciple-making. However, the way that McGavran interprets the Great Commission would be better suited to placing the emphasis on “going.” This application of his exegesis makes “go” in the Commission the imperative. But because the biblical record does not place it there, it seems that McGavran’s exegesis strains to make sure that it is understood that “make disciples” means go and make converts. As has been stated, this is understandable in the light of the fact that the Church has been so narrowly focused on nurture and preservation of existing Christians.

B. The New Testament Teacher-Disciple Relationship

The case for interpreting “make disciples” as meaning genuine personal conversion and the ongoing strengthening of that relationship can be enhanced by understanding the New Testament culture. In Jesus’ day, the concept of discipleship was understood and practiced. A disciple was a pupil or learner. The Greek word for disciple is *mathetes*. The noun *mathetes*, disciple, comes from

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the verb *manthanein*, to learn. Thus, there was a teacher-disciple relationship. James Blevins gives us insight into this relationship.

These Greek words call to mind the schools of Greek philosophy. Young boys would go to live with a great Greek philosopher and learn from his teachings. Debate and dialogue were favorite means of teaching in these encounters. This kind of student-teacher relationship is missing in the Old Testament. Thus in the Greek translation of the Old Testament the term *mathetes* does not appear. Even though much stress is placed on learning and teaching, it is never a unique disciple-teacher relationship. However, by the first century, there had emerged in Judaism a disciple-teacher role. This development was due to the formation of a large body of exegetical tradition around the Law that needed to be passed from one generation to the next. The Hebrew father was required to begin the process of teaching this tradition to his sons. However, by the time they were eight or nine years old, it was necessary to send one's sons to a village rabbi who could give them more detailed instruction.²

This background on the teacher-disciple relationship is helpful in understanding how the recipients would interpret the Commission of Jesus to "go and make disciples." In Matthew 10 Jesus calls his disciples to be with him. This was the establishment of the teacher-disciple relationship, but it was different from the typical Greek or Jewish mold. When a Greek teacher gathered a group of disciples they would study a particular philosophy, for example, nature or astrology. The Jewish rabbi approached discipleship from the perspective of the Law. The rabbi would amplify the Law of Moses and formulate principles so that the disciples could learn to obey the Law. Because different rabbis amplified the Law differently, various expressions emerged, such as, the Pharisees, who were especially particular about the correct procedure to live by in the effort to keep the Law. John the Baptist had his disciples, who for the most part were a protest movement. Jesus enters into this scene and espoused a unique form of discipleship, based not

on a philosophy, principle, or protest, but on the basis of a personal relationship with himself.³ Blevins offers the implications of such a relationship.

They did not become his followers just by their own free choice. It was a summons for the disciple to be like his teacher (Matt.10:24f). The call implied a readiness of the disciples to be persecuted even as Jesus was persecuted. If the disciples accepted the call, they abandoned all and followed Jesus. Jesus never projected an “easy road” for the disciple. He once said: “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20, KJV). No disciple may look back or take time to bury his dead (Luke 9:59–62). Jesus' call involved a radical decision on the part of the disciples to leave all and follow him. Discipleship, then, involved a radical decision “to be with Jesus.”⁴

It must be conceded that the disciples did not know entirely what was going to occur when they responded to the Master's call. But they had enough understanding of the teacher-disciple relationship to know that demands would be placed on them, and those demands would increase as they became fully trained. When the disciples were receiving the Commission, they had concluded three arduous, tumultuous years of training. All but one had endured the rigors of being Christ's disciple. Consequently when the call came to “make disciples” it was highly improbable that they understood it to mean a decision without radical conversion and obedience. Yet, it must be noted vigorously, they also understood that this task was a process.

In receiving their commission to “go and make disciples” the disciples probably were overwhelmed with thought of such a task being completed without the physical presence of Jesus. Further in the narrative of Matthew 28, Jesus promises them his presence, and Luke 24 records the promise of his power as they are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Something that was accomplished on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Presumably the task of making disciples required a presence and power that went beyond the level of

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discipleship that this band of followers had achieved. The process of making reproductions of themselves required supernatural empowerment.

C. Make Disciples as a Process

It would appear, however, that the North American church has lost sight of the arduous process of making disciples. Instead, the concentration of effort and resources goes into reinforcing existing Christians. As one person put it, "We don't make disciples, we maintain them." This is not speculation, for mere observation of modern day Christianity will result in the conclusion that the primary agenda of the church at large is the nurture of existing believers, rather than perceiving the church's function as the processing of people along a recognizable pathway toward maturity.

This could be at the heart of the problem in relationship to the "seeker-sensitive" format that has emerged with Christendom. Being seeker-sensitive, that is, presenting the gospel in the terms the prospect can understand and then moving them upon a continuum until you have them where you want them to be, has received enormous bad press. The claim from critics is that they have "watered down the gospel" or "they have introduced the world into the church." Perhaps those churches that have developed a seeker-sensitive format have rediscovered a New Testament principle, which says, start where people are at, and move them to where you want them to be. They have recognized that to reach people with the gospel you cannot "dump the whole load" on them, ignore their concerns, or expect them to come on our terms. Instead you have to process people.

John Wesley's strategy for making disciples is clear. When he concluded preaching he did not give the "altar call" that is customary in many churches, instead he invited people to dialogue with him, attend another service spontaneously planned for the next day, or invited the listeners to join a class. George Hunter says that the starting of these classes was the first objective of the preaching of Wesley.⁵ Hunter writes:

Wesley's rationale for this practice is rooted in his understanding of the process, by stages, in which people

become Christians, and upon which he based his whole practice of evangelism.

In brief, he believed that you

- a) Awaken people—to the fact of their lostness, their sins, their need for God.
- b) Enroll awakened people in a class (and, in three months, in a Methodist society). Their experiences within class and society will keep them awake and prepare them for their justification and new birth.
- c) Teach awakened enrolled people to expect to experience their justification. They would experience, at a time and in a manner of God's choosing, his forgiveness and acceptance.
- d) Teach justified people to expect to experience their sanctification in this life. Christians can expect God's grace to complete the work begun in their justification. His grace will free their hearts from sin's power so that their lives can be motivated by love and nothing else.

This four-stage process is consistent with his theological design (which Albert Outler refers to as Wesley's "Ordo Salutis"). In Wesleyan evangelism, each stage served as a conscious objective to be achieved in people's lives. In the cases of unchurched pagans, these four objectives were achieved in the 1,2,3,4 sequence suggested above.⁶

This is very helpful, because the tendency is to view "make disciples," as Wayne Zunkel would say, as "a bounded-set."⁷ That is, an absolute, something that has been accomplished, a completed action, a task fulfilled. The Great Commission is seen as something to be completed rather than something to be engaged in. The better view of "make disciples" is, as Wesley understood it, a process, something we engage in. This is consistent with the New Testament pattern of discipleship, and the way the term is defined in the gospels.

In the progression of examination of this concept "make

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disciples” it was not the intention to challenge the principle of “discipling” and “perfecting.” But that is what has resulted. These terms denote several realities that misrepresent what is intended by the Commission “make disciples.” They connote two tasks to be accomplished rather than actions to be engaged toward. Thus, the “discipling” definition of McGavran in truth picks up the evangel function, though maybe not in a strict sense. In Luke 2, Gabriel pronounced the “good news” or “evangel.” To evangelize is to proclaim the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ in hopes that it will gain a hearing and response. One could interpret McGavran as admonishing us to proclaim the gospel until we see the fruit. This is better suited to the meaning of *euangelizomai* than *matheteusate*. Evangelism is a task to do, and “make disciples” is a process to be engaged in, with evangelism an integral part of that process.

Peter Wagner perceives this situation and spends time in his Church Growth I class speaking of the 3-P's of evangelism, rather than the “discipling” and “perfecting” distinction. Presence Evangelism is doing good in the name of Jesus, lending a helping hand (John Wesley would add, for the purpose of awakening the unbeliever to their spiritual need). Proclamation Evangelism could be equated with “evangel,” presenting the good news of Jesus Christ in such a way that people hear, understand, and make a choice. Persuasion Evangelism is making disciples, that is, conversion to Christ. Wagner makes the point that church growth is concerned with all three. But to equate the term “make disciples” with Persuasion Evangelism alone is inconsistent with the New Testament. It negates the processing aspect of the concept and separates conversion from maturing, when in reality, “make disciples” should be perceived as beginning at where the prospect is at, and continuing through conversion until death of the believer. A better description would be to either add another “P,” which Wagner discourages, for “Production,” meaning the ongoing maturing of the convert; or relabel the 3-P diagram so that “make disciples” covers the 3-P's.⁸ This correction also needs to occur with Wagner's adaptation of James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton's “Spiritual Decision Process Model.” Wagner modifies it by equating

“evangelism” with “making disciples.” As stated earlier, to do so is not consistent with the New Testament intention. Further Wagner shows on his chart that this task is completed soon after conversion. Maturing then begins with +1 onward.⁹ Based on the previous discussion a more accurate reflection of the New Testament would have “make disciples” beginning at -8 and progressing indefinitely on the plus side.¹⁰ Engel would agree with this because the purpose of the diagram was to emphasize the process involved in making disciples. He says, “Thus, becoming a disciple is a process continuing over a life span as believers are conformed to the image of Christ (Phil. 1:6). The Church has a definite obligation to cultivate the new believer, helping him or her to grow in the faith.”¹¹ Later he emphasizes this point again.

The responsibility of the Christian communicator is to approach people where they are in terms of their spiritual position and, through an appropriate combination of message and media, to cause them to progress in their decision process toward initial commitment and subsequent growth. The goal, in short, is to bring about demonstrable and measurable change in people with respect to their response to the gospel.¹²

Thus, the original “Spiritual Decision Process Model” reflects the New Testament better than the adaptation of Wagner.

It can be argued that these technical distinctions are a waste of time, confusing in and of themselves, and creates a new set of differences based on one's theological presuppositions. That may or may not be true. The conclusion of this writer is that the way “make disciples” has been defined in Church Growth literature has caused confusion and enabled energies to be spent in efforts that may or may not have contributed to the fulfillment of the biblical Commission given by Jesus to his disciples. If one is to lead a local church body to engage in making disciples, it is imperative that the issues wrestled with here lead to some kind of conclusion, lest leader and laity are tossed back and forth.

D. Implications for Ministry

A theology professor of mine would always close the class discussion or debate, depending upon the topic, with the statement "Let's wrap it all up" or "Let's tie it up now." He would then summarize the main points of discussion and draw some conclusions for the benefit of the class. That is the intent at this point, to summarize the inquiry and draw some insight for reader.

The Church Growth Movement draws a good measure of its impetus from the words of Jesus in Matthew 28 when he tells his disciples to "go and make disciples." Understanding the term "make disciples" as intended by Jesus is of critical importance to church growth. But defining the term is not without its complexities. Confusion within the church, within church growth writings, and within differing theological traditions necessitates investigation. At issue is the "discipling"- "perfecting" concept of Donald McGavran. The obvious preference for equating the term "make disciples" with conversion. The minimal emphasis placed on the process involved in making disciples. The varying ways in which terms are defined and utilized, sometimes in contradiction to each other, and the inability of Church Growth to build a theological framework that will help provide perimeters for who and how church growth principles and methods are utilized. As a result, each theological tradition must decide what is implied and intended by Jesus.

This brings us to some implications for pastoral ministry. First, when the disciples received the Commission of Jesus they understood it to mean a reproduction of themselves. To use all available means to persuade people to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. This means total allegiance to him and him alone. Dietrich Bonhoeffer would describe it as:

Follow me, run along behind me! That is all. To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content.... The disciple simply burns his boats and goes ahead. He is called out, and has to forsake his old life.... It is nothing else than bondage to Jesus Christ alone, completely breaking through every programme, every ideal, every set

of laws.... He alone matters.¹³

Any result less than fully expressed devotion to Jesus Christ does not do justice to the gospel narrative detailing the disciples relationship with Jesus.

Second, this endeavor was understood by Christ's disciples to mean a process. When Jesus was with the woman at the well, he spoke of Living Water, when at the pool of Bethesda he spoke of healing, with farmers it was seeds, and with fishermen, fish. Christ's disciples would also need to start where the unbeliever was and move along a continuum until Christlikeness was evidenced in the disciple, and they were taking responsibility for their own growth, and reproducing themselves in others. It is a continuous cycle, it is a process which concludes with death.

These first two conclusions rightly understood can have a profound affect upon what is expected from the evangelistic decision, especially for those whose tradition speaks of "full devotion" and "total commitment" as standard operating procedure. Often the belief and expectation is that believers should make this jump to total commitment in almost an instantaneous manner. Into the "bounded-set" of the totally committed. Either you are in or out. This does not reflect sensitivity to the process element of our faith development. A better approach would be to call believers to take the next step in commitment. The problem is that we like to deal in bounded sets, in the instantaneous, in decisive acts of commitment, and "moving up" as the old timers would articulate it. The tendency is to "dump the whole load" on them, and then see if they have the courage to respond. Certainly there is room for this scenario, but balance is critical if we are to be true to the New Testament. Truth out of balance is error.

In addition to this reality, there is the additional application of the process element to our methodology. Greater care needs to be taken in the planning of specific aspects of church life so as to facilitate and foster growth in Christ. Currently the system of Sunday School, preaching services, revivals, Bible studies, for example, fail to link together and coordinate the fostering of maturity. What appears to have occurred, is the independent creation of

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programs in the church that maintain a certain level of discipleship. People have become so accustomed to hearing the same “stuff,” to challenge the interior life to progress onward would be seen as suspect. In addition, thought has not been given to how the church processes a seeker toward faith in Christ. The practice is to expect them to be so “hungry” for Christ that they accept what we offer the believer and “hang around until they get it.” This situation does not do justice to the New Testament practices of Jesus, nor the stated practice of the Apostle Paul. He said, “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (I Corinthians 9:22, RSV).

Third, a key component of the process is the “born again” experience of the convert. This is a clearly understood event in the mind of the new disciple, and it establishes a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, which enables them to become all that God intends for them.

Fourth, and this is restatement from above, while the evangelical church has understood the crisis and process aspects of salvation and sanctification, they have failed to understand the necessity for establishing within the church those methods that will process people from unbelief to full devotion, to reproducing disciples. Primarily the energies of the church are devoted to maintenance of the current state of maturity of its members.

At the outset of the class, Theology of Church Growth, taught by Charles Van Engen, the question is posed, “Can I be saved, but not take the discipleship?” It is a theological and pastoral issue. How one answers it will determine the content of preaching, teaching, methods, and strategies. Upon investigation of the concept “make disciples,” the question is most likely, no. With that in mind, responsibility must be assumed for the development of appropriate discipleship strategies that will ensure there are not too few or too many discipleship expectations, based on the individual's need.

Certainly there will be disagreement, and perhaps consensus can never be accomplished for the simplest of reasons—we do not have the Lamb's book of Life. Consequently we are left to make our own value judgment as to what it means to “make

disciples.” Certainly we can agree that it is in the fruit. But what is fruit? Donald McGavran would say, “responsible church membership.” But that brings us full circle, because each theological tradition must define that too. We will not all agree, but probably in the process of inquiry our hearts will be stirred by the Spirit of God for the cause of Christ, and people will be converted to Him, enfolded in the church, deployed in ministry, and thus, we have fulfilled, after all, the Great Commission. May the discussion and debate continue!

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NOTES

1. Donald A. McGavran, “How About That New Verb, To Disciple,” in *Church Growth Bulletin* (May 1981).

2. James L. Blevins, “The Calling of the Twelve,” in *The Equipping of Disciples*, ed. John Hendrix and Lloyd Householder (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), 16.

3. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, s.v. “disciple.”

4. Blevins, 17.

5. George G. Hunter III, *To Spread The Power: Church Growth in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 57.

6. Ibid.

7. Wayne C. Zunkel, *Church Growth Under Fire* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987), 50.

8. See Appendix A.

9. See Appendix B.

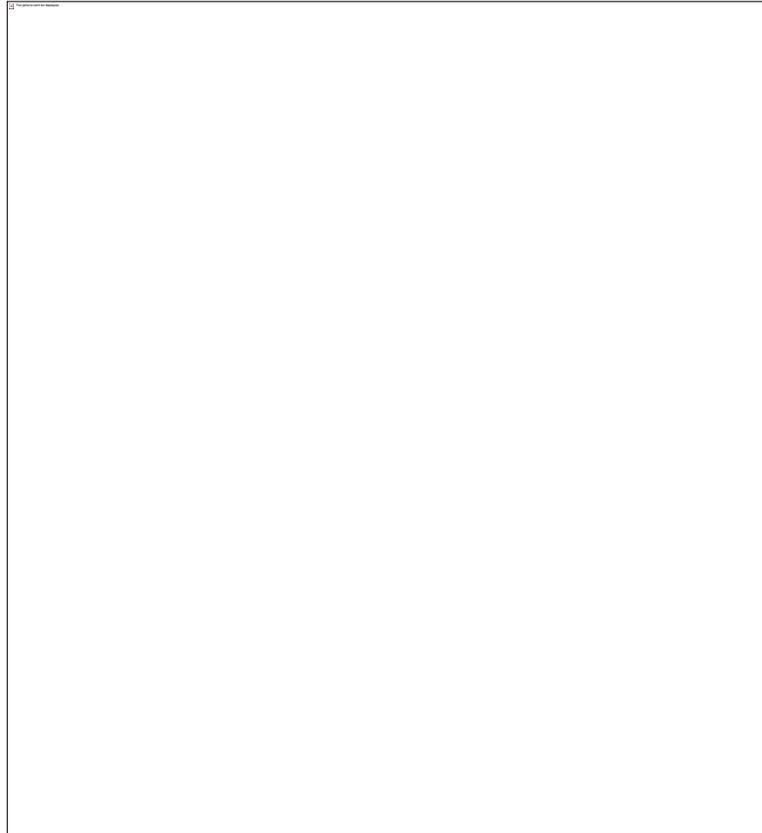
10. Ibid.

11. James F. Engel and H. Wilbert Norton, *What's Gone Wrong With The Harvest?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 47.

12. Ibid., 47.

13. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, translated from the German *Nachfolge* by R. H. Fuller, first published in 1937 by Chr. Kaiser Verlag Munchen with some revision by Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan Company, 1949), 1963, 62.

Appendix A



Appendix B

