



Learning to Make Disciples of Jesus: *The Calling of Every Believer*

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Have you ever been discipled by another believer? That is, did anyone help you in the process of coming to faith? After you came to Christ, did anyone help you grow more like Jesus, either informally or in some organized fashion? Or, from the other side, have you ever been in the discipling role, helping someone come to faith in Christ or grow as His disciple?

If you answered yes, you already have some level of experience with disciple making. If you answered no, fear not, for help is at hand. *Help? Why do I need help?* you say. *I am not called to a ministry of disciple making. That's somebody else's job.* If this is your reaction, you have lots of company. Many in the church today think that disciple making is someone else's ministry. But Jesus doesn't give us that option.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, told them that universal authority had been conferred on Him, and commissioned them to a universal mission:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age
(Matt. 28:18–20).¹

This was, and still is, Jesus' plan to spread God's kingdom throughout the world, and you and I have a part to play. Simply put, they were to reproduce themselves by taking their disciples through the same basic

teaching and training that Jesus had given them in their apprenticeship with Him. Let's look at Jesus' call to make disciples and how we are to do it.

As we start, let's briefly consider why making disciples is so important. First, making disciples is *the* great mission Jesus gave His followers before He returned to heaven. This mission, which has been passed down from generation to generation by the faithful, now rests upon you and me.

Second, Jesus' simple, yet brilliant plan—making disciples, who would in turn make other disciples, who would make still more disciples and so on until He returns—really works! He is counting on us to fulfill our assignment, and there is no Plan B.

Third, making disciples has been neglected for so long that there is now a crisis of discipleship in the American church. Few professing Christians are living as disciples of Jesus, and fewer still are making disciples. This failure to be salt and light in our decaying society has contributed greatly to the undermining of the church, robbing us of credibility in the eyes of the world and accelerating the spiritual and moral decline in society.

A fourth reason is that at the final exam of life, Judgment Day, Jesus will ask, among other things, whether we obeyed His command to go and make disciples. As you look into His searching, all-knowing eyes, what will you say?



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What Is a Disciple?

To make disciples, we first need to know what a disciple is. Many people today are confused about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, and this is the root of serious problems in the church. Some think a disciple is a person in full-time vocational ministry—such as a pastor, priest, or missionary—but not an ordinary believer. Others believe a disciple is someone who has gone through a “discipleship program,” studying the basics of the Christian life for several weeks or months. Still others think a disciple is a Christian who has made an optional, higher level of commitment to Christ than the average believer.

The real question, however, is what the Bible says a disciple is. The standard lexicon of New Testament Greek defines the word *disciple* as a “learner, pupil, adherent.”² With that basic definition in mind, we must go on to observe how Jesus adapted and used the word to serve His unique purposes. Based on a comprehensive analysis of the word in the Gospels, Professor Michael Wilkins says: “a *disciple of Jesus* is someone who has come to him for eternal life, claimed him as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following him.”³ In other words, a disciple of Jesus is not simply someone who has made a profession of faith, or even someone who has learned the teachings of Jesus (or the Bible), but someone who has come to repentance and faith and is seeking to follow His teaching and example.

Some people may think the definition given above far exceeds the definition of a basic Christian and that a disciple is after all a Christian who has made a higher level of commitment to Christ. However, in the Acts of the Apostles, believers in Jesus are typically referred to as disciples, twenty-eight times, in fact. Only later did the Gentiles in Antioch give them the nickname “Christians” (Acts 11:26), which stuck. But the two words were clearly synonyms. To be a true Christian is, by definition, to be a disciple.

Following Jesus as a disciple (or true Christian) is a process of learning to become more and more like Jesus Himself. The heart of this process is learning and obeying the teachings of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. What are some of the teachings in Jesus’ curriculum? Things like denial of self, wholehearted love for God, sacrificial love for neighbors, forgiveness of enemies, humility, servanthood, sexual purity, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, mission, and obedience; these are some of the major themes. They are basic, foundational things that every disciple should learn about

and begin to practice as early as possible in his or her Christian life.

What Is Discipleship and Discipling?

Being a disciple of Jesus and growing in Christlikeness is a wonderfully blessed but very challenging journey through life. This “ongoing process of growth as a disciple”⁴ is commonly referred to as discipleship. (Paul uses the equivalent idea of being conformed to the image of Christ [Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18] and calls believers to the same wholehearted surrender, commitment, and transformation as Jesus [Rom. 12:1].)

Whatever language we use to describe it, we must reckon with the fact that growing in Christlikeness takes time and will have difficulties along the way. In our “instant everything” culture, we periodically will need to remind ourselves and those we disciple that this process cannot be completed in a matter of weeks or even months; it is the work of a lifetime and will require patient perseverance.

With our American tendency toward individualism, we must also remember that it cannot be completed alone. An individualistic, do-it-yourself faith or “solo Christianity” is guaranteed to fail. That is why we *must* be an actively engaged member of a congregation of God’s people, where we have Christ-centered friends to walk with us and help us grow as disciples. This need has given rise to the word *discipling*, which “implies the responsibility of disciples helping one another to grow as disciples.”

Discipling is a ministry to which all believers are called in some fashion. Someone has said that each of us needs to be in relationship with at least one person who is like a “Paul”—a more mature believer who can disciple (spiritually mentor) us; at least one like “Timothy”—a person younger in the faith whom we can disciple; and one or two peers like “Barnabas” (who encouraged Paul) to cheer us on.

What Are the Qualifications of a Disciple Maker?

To make disciples, you must be a disciple yourself. This doesn’t mean that you need to be a perfect disciple or a Bible scholar, only that you have a repentant faith, are committed to Jesus as Lord, and are seeking to follow Him in your daily walk. You should have been a disciple for a while and be reasonably well grounded in Scripture and established in your spiritual life. And you should also be humble enough to let

your disciple know that you have your own struggles and aren't perfect.

How Do We Make Disciples?

Jesus gave us clear, practical instructions. If we follow them, we will find success. He said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them . . . teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19–20). What we have here is a main verb, *make disciples*, as an imperative that is amplified by three subordinate participles that share some of its force: going, baptizing, and teaching. Making disciples (learners, pupils, adherents) of Jesus is the focal point and begins with our going out to help nonbelievers learn more about who Jesus is, what He did on the cross, and how that applies to their lives, with the goal of helping them come to saving faith. But it doesn't end there. It is characterized by encouraging and assisting those who repent and believe the gospel to be baptized and then teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded His disciples to do. Failure to do the last part has had disastrous consequences for the church. Let's look at each of these aspects in more detail.

Going

Going is the initial stage in making disciples. A literal rendering of the Greek text reads, "having gone, make disciples." But because this participle has imperative force, the best way to express its meaning is to use the word *go* as does the English Standard Version. It is a command, not a suggestion. On a practical level, this means that we must take initiative, that we must be intentional about going out to make disciples. We may go nearby or we may go to the ends of the earth, but we must go. To whom do we go? Because the mission of Jesus and the kingdom is no longer focused exclusively on Israel (Matt. 10:5–6) but is now opened up to all ethnic groups, *everyone* is fair game.

Since the first step in becoming a disciple is to repent of sin and to trust Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, *we need to understand the gospel message and learn how to share it with others*. Many people find this idea unsettling, if not terrifying; but it need not be so if we are properly prepared. What exactly is the gospel message? Sometimes people confuse sharing the gospel with sharing their personal testimony. But the two are very different. Sharing one's testimony is telling the story of how the gospel message brought you to salvation; it is not the gospel message itself. The heart of the gospel is the good news that "Christ died for our sins

in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). This simple message "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

Is it hard to share the gospel? Not really. The biggest obstacle is with us—our "fear of men" and what people will think of us, the impact on our reputation in the community, and the like. We need to resist this, ask God for increased courage, and step out in faith and obedience, trusting Him to teach, guide, and empower us.

In today's world, sharing the gospel typically involves first building a relationship, and this takes time. At some point, when the time seems right, you could share the gospel very naturally by weaving something like this into a conversation: "God loves you so much that He sent His only Son to pay for your sins on the cross so that you can have everlasting life. Then He gave proof that Jesus was the divine Savior of the world by raising Him from the dead." It is on the basis of this simple, powerful message that we invite men and women to repent of their sins and trust in the crucified and resurrected Christ for salvation. You could make that invitation by saying something like this, "If you believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died to pay for your sins and are ready to turn to Him for salvation, just tell Him so in your own words and give yourself to Him."

How do we reach the point with someone where we can share this message? As noted, building a relationship is normally the first step. In each stage, it is vital to have the guidance and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, for He is the agent of conversion and will give us wisdom. This means we need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, exhibiting an attitude of grace and love, no matter what a person's particular sins may be. Jesus was able to love and accept sinners without compromising truth or righteousness, and He is our model. We aim to exhibit humility, gentleness, and respect and resist any tendency toward arrogance, cockiness, or having all the answers. Patience is also important; normally the process will take time, as we listen to questions and concerns, gently answer and address them, and share our own stories and experiences where appropriate.

The process of helping someone become a disciple of Jesus moves quickly with some people and takes longer with others. I have read that people who come to salvation have had some twenty-six exposures to the gospel before finally praying to receive Christ. Each encounter can be seen as a step that moves some-

one closer to Christ and salvation. That should be our goal. We should help people take as many steps as they are ready and willing to take.

We may never see the final outcome, but that does not mean our efforts have been in vain. We are not responsible for the results; that is God's work. Our responsibility is simply to share the message as clearly and lovingly as we can in the power of the Holy Spirit, asking the Spirit to apply it in His own way and time. Once we see that we have done all we can with a person in the evangelistic stage, we need to pray for God to bring the next witness into that person's life to continue His work—to hand the person off, so to speak.

In our desire to see a response, we may become impatient for results. But we are ill-advised to use pressure tactics or manipulation, no matter how well intended. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to open the heart and mind of a person; He alone can do it.

Where do we start? I would suggest reading a book or two on how to share the gospel in today's world. (See the recommendations at the end of this article.) Then pray and ask the Holy Spirit to lead you. Conversation is often easier with people you already know—especially friends, neighbors, and work colleagues—than with total strangers; this may well be where the Spirit directs your first efforts. But you never know how God will work, so be open. Having gained some experience, you will then be in a better position to reach out beyond the bounds of comfort and familiarity. You may discover a need to make more friends among nonbelievers. Research has shown that within eighteen months of conversion, most people have lost contact with their nonbelieving friends.

Baptizing

Once individuals have come to saving faith in Christ, the next step is to be baptized. In baptism they are publicly forsaking the world and declaring their allegiance to Jesus and submission to His lordship and entrance into His kingdom. In the New Testament, baptism was considered so important that converts were baptized immediately—even in the middle of the night, as with the Philippian jailer. Your role with such people is to help them understand the importance of obeying Jesus' command to be baptized. An unbaptized disciple would have been unthinkable to the early church. Yet today it is not uncommon to find people who have prayed to receive Christ and even attend church but have not been baptized.

This brief, one-time event is the doorway into the fellowship of the church. We should do all

we can to encourage converts to be baptized as soon as practically possible. Becoming a member of a healthy church, a community of disciples, is not optional; it is essential for spiritual survival and maturation.

Teaching

The person who has repented of his or her sins, trusted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and been baptized has become a disciple of Jesus. He or she is now in the school of discipleship—a follower, learner, and pupil of the Lord. *Accordingly, the disciple-making process now shifts to teaching the new disciple to understand and obey the teachings that Jesus taught His first disciples* (Matt. 28:19). This is the work of a lifetime. To progress, the new Christian needs help from a more mature disciple.

How do we facilitate this learning process, and where do we find teaching material? A vital key in the discipling process is to build a trusting relationship. Basic friendship is the goal. This can be developed in any number of ways. (See recommended resources at the end of this article.) The best frontline teaching material is the Gospel of Matthew, which was designed as a manual of discipleship and has been used for that purpose throughout church history. The Sermon on the Mount, the first of Matthew's five teaching sections, is the specific place to begin. The other three Gospels also contain important material not found in Matthew and provide valuable teaching. Good study guides are available for this purpose.

As you disciple people, remember that simply learning Jesus' teachings doesn't make one a disciple. The true disciple *obeys* Jesus' commands. How well the disciple engages in this process largely determines whether he or she will be a good disciple or a poor one.

The teachings of Jesus can be learned in several ways, and you should encourage your disciple to engage with each. The first priority is helping the disciple find and attend a church that teaches the Bible. Next, encourage regular, private reading and study of the Bible, along with memorization and meditation. Help him or her develop a regular practice of these important spiritual disciplines. Disciples also need to connect with other disciples in their church community through Bible study groups and discussions where they can form friendships and benefit from the insights of others. Getting plugged into such a group is vital. But your most important role is to

serve as a spiritual mentor through personal discipling, meeting regularly to talk about following Jesus and all that it involves. Remember that this is not a purely cognitive endeavor. All study must be dependent on the Holy Spirit's illumination, should engage the emotions where appropriate, and ultimately lead to obedience.

As the disciple grows from a baby believer to an adolescent and then to a mature believer, the issues and challenges he or she must deal with will change. But no matter how long any of us lives, we will never graduate from Jesus' school of discipleship. Throughout life, we all need the ministry of a discipler or spiritual mentor to encourage us along in the process of spiritual transformation—of being conformed into the image of Christ.

Where Do I Start?

"How could I ever do this?" you say. I don't have the training or ability. It can be helpful to remind ourselves that Jesus' first disciples were ordinary men with no special education or training other than knowing Him and learning from Him. They had neither college degrees nor high school diplomas, but He used them to turn the world upside down. And most of the discipling that has been done since Jesus' day has been done by people like them. Reading a few good books on discipleship and discipling can be helpful, but you don't need a degree in religion or theology to disciple people effectively. You just need to know Him and His teachings, be filled with His Spirit, and be obedient. As you step out in faith and obedience, you will ultimately learn by doing. And the longer you do it, the more effective you will become.

One good way to start discipling is to be a small-group co-leader with a more experienced discipler. That way you can be coached by someone. Or you can serve as a group facilitator, using a resource like *Multiply* or *Discipleship Essentials*. This way, you are not expected to have all the answers. In any case, discipling is learned through experience; the more you do it, the more effective you become. There is no other way.

Ultimately, the most important thing you need is provided by Jesus Himself. He told His first disciples, "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The promise of His presence (through the Holy Spirit) remains in full force for all who follow in their steps. He will be with you and me every step of the way as we seek to do the work of making disciples, work we could never do in our own strength.

Recommended Resources

Making Friends:

The Friendship Factor, Alan McGinnis (Augsburg)
Making Friends, Em Griffin (InterVarsity).

Evangelism:

Questioning Evangelism, Randy Newman (Kregel Publications)

Bringing the Gospel Home, also by Randy Newman (Crossway)

Two Ways to Live (Matthias Media)

Discipleship Books:

Transforming Discipleship: Making Disciples a Few at a Time, Greg Ogden (InterVarsity)

In His Image: Reflecting Christ in Everyday Life, Michael Wilkins (NavPress)

Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Martino or Eerdmans).

Multiply, Francis Chan and Mark Beuving (Cook);

Discipleship Essentials, Greg Ogden (InterVarsity).

Notes:

1. All Scripture quotations in this article are from the *English Standard Version*.

2. Walter Bauer, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Wilber Arndt, and, Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 485.

3. Michael Wilkins, *Following the Master* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 41.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid

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