

Chapter 1

Re-igniting Disciple-Making: Teaching in the Great Commission

The primary purpose of the church is to make disciples – nurturing active faith that transforms people into fully devoted followers of Jesus. Generation after generation, God's revealed truth and His desire for relationship with us has been handed down through the long-valued tradition of discipleship. Entrusting beliefs, character, and skills through life-on-life teaching is key to the fulfillment of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. And now, upcoming generations are expressing a real desire for the kind of personal connections that help them navigate the challenges of our day, and enjoy a sense of belonging.

The Need is All Around Us

Emily and Justin are married with two young children, each with a demanding full-time career, high visibility in the community, and no other family in the area. New to their faith, they were thirsty for connection with other believers who could help them integrate life and faith well. Church on Sunday was meaningful but it wasn't giving them the up-close relationships and input they desired.

Ann is a single grandmother of grown children, who cares for both grandchildren and aging parents in her early retirement. Felipe's work takes him out of town often so that he finds it hard to stay well-connected with his wife and teenagers, much less any friends. Eleanor is an older widow who longs for more contact with others but isn't sure what she has to offer at this stage of her life. Susan is a medical doctor and a single adult in what she experiences as a "couples-world" so she often feels outside the flow of her church. Tyrell is a full-time student in community college, working part-time, and growing dissatisfied with online friendships.

Though they have been believers for many years, they all desperately want closer friendship with others where they can express and explore their challenges in ways that help them move closer to God and to others, and experience a meaningful experience of community.

The Opportunity to Participate

Discipleship by its very nature involves a lifetime of learning that happens in interactive relationships between followers of Jesus as they receive and absorb the revelation (new learning) He came to give them and to show them. While He could have written it all on our

hearts at birth, God chose to reveal Himself to us through communication with us and with each other. Therefore, the role of teaching God's revealed Truth is both a necessity and a privilege! But it is more than just delivery of information – it is a process of modeling, connecting, and absorbing it in the life-sharing relationship called “discipleship.”

- **How many of us have backed away from teaching opportunities in our churches or ministries because we didn't feel adequate or gifted?**
- **How many of us have backed away from discipling others because we didn't have a sense of what to do, as we'd never really been disciplined ourselves?**
- **How many of us have backed away from potential conversations because we weren't sure how to engage people meaningfully?**

Reflection 1:1: *How well met are your own desires for connection in your community of faith? What has tended to hold you back from being involved in engaging others for the purpose of discipleship?*

In this study we hope to discover a way to offer discipleship experiences that involve both the teacher and the learner *together* in a process that is active, responsive, and enjoyable. **Group discipleship is a relational process using guided conversation among peers to help us make connections between our life experiences and the truth that God has given to us.** While lecture is something that few do well and/or comfortably, conversational teaching is a wonderful form of discipleship that many can do well to pass on our faith to others. The same skills also help us engage people in more meaningful conversation in our neighborhoods, at work, or around the dinner table!

Developing a Passion for Discipleship

I became a believer in my early teens as a result of a summer day-camp experience that a friend in my neighborhood invited me to attend with her. My friend had more exposure to faith than I had at that point, and she invited me into a group of learners in my neighborhood where I came to understand that I could have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That week was a memorably rich and clear launching point for my own faith.

Soon afterward I met a classmate who was a year older in the faith than I, and a voracious reader of the Bible and Bible teaching. Through many conversations she poured her love and growing discovery of God into me. We began attending a high school Bible study together where we experienced guided learning among mentors and peers. It was this

experience of community that launched us both into a rich new chapter of our walks with God.

Some years later, as a college student, I experienced my first small group of young women. We were mentored by a young wife/mother in the church who met regularly around the Scripture with us. She made herself available to us personally as we grappled toward God with our real life challenges. Through group discipleship, she gave us a place to laugh, cry, puzzle, and make connections, as we learned to love God and His powerful Word. We learned from her and from each other.

During those formative years in that same church, a young couple gave themselves to the spiritual development of college students. They had us into their home and made an intentional, regular place for us to process our lives and our growing understanding of Truth. They also gave us opportunities to practice what we were learning. They launched us into disciple-making lifestyles of our own as we were infected with their passion for God and by shared experiences of the gospel in our lives. It was absolutely life changing for me, catapulting me into yet another phase of growth and love for God ... and for the world for which He died! My spiritual DNA was changed and I was hooked on the joy and privilege of a lifetime of growing, both as a disciple and as a disciple-maker. I sought to give myself away with the same healthy passion I observed in our disciplers.

Since those formative early years of my spiritual life, God has continued to provide different people to encourage me in increasing depth, confidence, and skills related to God's person and purposes: character, priorities, hospitality, stewardship, Bible study and teaching, compassion, trust and hope. As I look back I see many people who were the connection point for my next growth spurt, and the various group experiences that catalyzed that growth in ways I could not have experienced alone. As we enjoy following others into fuller devotion to Christ, the lifestyle of bringing others along with us is contagious!

Reflection 1:2: *What formative experiences have you had, that impacted your understanding of the Christian life? Of discipleship in particular? What do you wish might have been different?*

The Great Commission of Jesus

The primary purpose of the local church is to make disciples – to provide avenues into relationships that nurture discovery and faith – whether coming to know God initially or continuing to learn more about Him over a lifetime! Therefore, a primary focus of the life of the worshipping believer is intentional involvement in the growth process of others in some way. **And we will see that teaching is a key element in that process.**

While Jesus spent time with the multitudes, he spent more time with about seventy disciples who followed Him faithfully (Luke 10). But He spent the most time with the inner

circle of Twelve Disciples who were to ignite the tradition of multiplying His life and teaching into others - who would then continue to do the same. In Matthew 28:16-20, we hear and see Jesus' words to the eleven Disciples (without Judas now), after His resurrection and before His ascension. Jesus gives His ultimate charge to these people who would change the world – and so to all who would come after them. All He so deliberately taught, modeled, and shared with them culminates in the “Great Commission.” Let’s look at this familiar passage more closely:

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.

17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 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,

20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Reflection 1:3: *What has been your understanding of the Great Commission and your role in it up to this point in your life?*

“They worshiped Him, but some doubted”

Even in the Disciples' fear and devastation around Christ's crucifixion, verse 16 indicates that their hope flickered enough to obey the words Jesus gave them to meet Him in Galilee after He had been raised (Matt. 28:7-10). They must have been so relieved and amazed to see Him again! But they must have been simultaneously confused and cautious about what it meant after the trauma they had endured around His arrest, beatings, and gruesome murder – the apparent extinguishing of their hopes!

They had left everything and followed Jesus for three years because they so believed in what they had seen, heard, and experienced in relationship with Him. But the Disciples had expected a different, more victorious ending than what transpired, and they surely had no answers to the taunting and accusations that came to them as His followers. So they worshiped Him ... and some doubted. (v.17)

“All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me”

Jesus' words to His conflicted Disciples speak directly to both their worship and their doubt. He reaffirms that all authority is His, even in this confusing situation (v.18). Nothing had changed with regard to His authority, but *the opportunity for them to stretch their*

perspective of what He was doing and how He was doing it needed to change in order for them to embrace a bigger reality. His authority in their lives and in all things eternal and temporal was still in effect. And because Jesus was still completely in control of the purposes for His invasion of human history, the Disciples were to continue to embrace His authority in their lives ... and now lead others to do the same.

It's worth noting that Jesus did not rebuke them in this passage for their doubt as He had done at other times. Instead, He entrusted His ministry to them! He had been with them for three years and seen growth and commitment. He understood that their imperfect faith would continue to grow and impact the world. So, even in their doubts at this point, He knew they had been changed *enough*, that they loved Him *enough*, and that they were committed and skilled *enough* with what He had built into them. Even with those human doubts (Am I adequate for this calling? Is this worth giving my life to? Is Jesus really in charge?), they were ready to be the ones that would carry His purposes for the world forward – and to continue growing in passion and vision as they moved ahead. That affirming heart of Jesus toward us gives us both comfort and courage!

Reflection 1:4: *In what ways have you perhaps doubted as you consider your own response to Jesus' authority? How does this passage encourage you?*

The Focus of the Great Commission: Make Disciples

In Matthew 28:19 we first read, “*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...*” *Therefore* connects the reason *before* it to the response *after* it. His *authority* is the reason and *make disciples* is the appropriate response to that authority. “Make disciples” is the focus of his instruction to them. **Following Jesus would now mean that they would embrace the clear intention of making disciples as the framework for how they would live their lives, nurturing others into the same new life and commission that they had received.** They were to actively pursue others around them as Jesus pursued them, just as He taught them to do when they ministered together during those three years.

“Make Disciples”

So just what is a disciple? What was Jesus asking them to do? **A disciple is a learner, a follower, an imitator, or an apprentice.** Discipleship was a familiar concept in Jewish culture. Traditions, identity, and trades were passed down through apprenticeship. It implies gaining knowledge and training, person to person. The disciples, or apprentices, matured in the nurture of the disciple-maker. In the rabbinical schools of the first century, there were five characteristics of a disciple:

- Submission to the teacher
- Learning the teacher’s way of ministry

- Memorizing the teacher's word
- Imitating the teacher's life
- Discipling others! (becoming a disciple-maker)

The disciples would absorb the beliefs, character, and skills of the discipler. And ultimately, the disciples would also become disciplers as a key mark of a true disciple. At a basic level, the Disciples knew what Jesus was asking of them. But throughout their time with Him, they would grow into much greater understanding of all discipleship meant. Their changed lives would be given to making other disciples of Jesus, who would make disciples, who would make disciples, and on it would go, generation to generation. It was not only a form of relationship and learning, *He was giving them a strategy to build His church for the age to come.*

“Of all Nations”

Making disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19) implied an intentional strategy of multiplication that was to be the focus of their lives. Whatever else they needed to do to earn a living or rest or care for their human concerns, this was to be the undergirding motivation and commitment of their existence from here on. As we know from the New Testament and early history, these people gave themselves fully to their charge from the Savior both at home and by traveling the known world, sharing the good news, and discipling and establishing local bodies of faith wherever they were.

In Acts 1:1-9 Jesus repeats his charge to them, beginning at home, and expanding out to the community, region, and the world as disciples continued to multiply:

The first account ... about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day He was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles He had chosen ... He said to them, 'But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Thus began the disciple-making movement. Even as they shared the gospel at home in Jerusalem in Acts 2:1-13, people from many languages and countries heard it and likely took it home with them. From this point until the Day of the Lord, the church will be the multiplying witness of Christ in the world. On-going discipleship – life on life – is God's key to all the world hearing, seeing, and knowing God, both at home and abroad. The presence of disciples in every community bears witness to the Truth of Christ, making that witness vibrant, unmistakable, and effective in every generation.

“Go, Baptize, and Teach”

In order to make disciples, Jesus draws attention to three key aspects of carrying it out: *Go, baptize, and teach.* First, the disciples were to “go.” The good news of Jesus was for them and for Israel, but it was also for the whole world. Some like Peter, Philip, and Paul would travel abroad to make disciples. Others like James and John would make disciples at home in Jerusalem. The word: “go” is an active verb meaning to “journey,” “pursue a course,” or be

“on the way.” It might be better understood to say '*as you are going*' or '*on your way*' make disciples. **It is more about active involvement rather than specific location.** Make disciples as part of the flow of your life, wherever you are. Perhaps it is the same idea that Moses uses in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 when he instructs parents to teach their children by training and modeling as they live their lives:

And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.

Now Jesus is talking about becoming spiritual parents to others in the family of God. *Going* is about moving toward others for the sake of Christ as we live our daily lives.

Baptizing then would be a unique identifying experience for those who found forgiveness and new life in Jesus, and *teaching* would be the ongoing process of bringing the transforming truth of God into their lives. We will look more later into the important component of teaching in making disciples.

Multiplying through the Generations

In our time, many have somehow understood that this Great Commission is more about the word “Go.” Go to a foreign land, and tell and convert (evangelize), but this is not actually what the passage says. The passage says to *make disciples*. The implications of how we understand Jesus' words are enormous. Throughout the book of Acts we see how God uses the Apostles and their disciples to establish communities of disciples far and wide. The Apostle Paul basically repeats the Great Commission to His own disciples in 2 Timothy 2:2 where we see the ongoing work of investing in faithful disciples:

And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

The rest of the New Testament gives us various writings and letters from these early disciple-makers to the maturing local bodies in various places as the Church takes root. The Apostles and their disciples spent time with those who responded, grounding and growing them in their faith so that they grew as Kingdom citizens. Discipleship brought increasing freedom and perspective to those who were given New Life. Growing numbers of disciples established churches and shepherds for those churches to continue multiplying the Truth in the world across all the generations. And so, here we are today with the same mandate for tomorrow.

The Role of Teaching in Discipleship

While we may tend to focus on the *go and baptize* of verse 19, we find a most crucial aspect of making disciples in verse 20:

And teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

It is this phrase in the passage that is perhaps the most neglected in the discipleship perspective of Christ's people. While discipleship includes embracing the good news (go, baptize), this next phrase (teach) is meant to rightfully occupy the entire lifetime of a disciple, not just the first few weeks or months!

As we discovered in the apprenticeship concept, *teaching* is not just a transfer of information or facts. It is a relationship of communication, training, and growth. The teacher offers instruction, modeling, and discussion for the purpose of bringing about change in the one being taught. Specifically, the disciple is *to obey* or submit to the Truth of God as the outcome of real learning.

Knowing and obeying were never meant to be separate experiences. Teaching and learning are two sides of the same coin where God's people invest in each other's lives. That's how the Master set it up! **Teaching is a relationship between believers where we share important realities and truths with others, modeling their impact on how life under the Lordship of Christ is lived, and facilitating a process of growth, understanding, and change.**

A Lifetime Purpose

In giving His Disciples the charge to make disciples by "teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you," **Jesus gave them a life-consuming purpose to align their lives around from then on.** Teach them to obey *everything*? This is the idea of "full" and "continual." It doesn't mean every disciple will be able to teach every bit of truth contained in God's Word. It does mean that every committed disciple is to devote themselves to passing on the fullness of what they have understood and received. After all, discipleship is a lifetime process in which one continually learns more from God through others. So the disciple also has a lifetime of passing on his/her ongoing and growing understanding to others.

The Apostle Paul repeats a similar passion for his life as a disciple and a disciple-maker in Colossians 1:28-29. He uses words of devoted movement toward more complete maturity over a lifetime to describe the commitment of his life, breath, and resources.

28: We proclaim Him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.

29: To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.

Going Beyond the Basics

In Hebrews 6:1-3, the writer also reminds us that making disciples is a lifetime pursuit, both in one's own growth and in the growth of others who come after us.

1: Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,

2: instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

3: And God permitting, we will do so.

The writer has spent several chapters before this passage to explain the elementary teachings about Christ (repentance, faith, beginning doctrinal teachings, eternal life, and judgment) and now he wants believers to go on from there to maturity, or “completeness.” Completeness cannot take place without building on the foundational things. If we do not live according to the foundations of the faith, we will have nothing secure to build upon.ⁱⁱ This is an important investment in making disciples.

But foundational things are not all there is to discipleship. **There is a process that takes us from the “foundation” to “maturity,” and this is perhaps even the greater time investment over the life of disciple.** Going beyond the basics into the profound privilege of embracing all we are and have in Christ can occupy a lifetime:

- Knowing God as He longs to be known,
- Living in full confidence of the unseen things of faith,
- Relaxing in the arms of a God that gets increasingly bigger the more we know of Him,
- Recognizing His presence and work around us,
- And being comfortable with the great mysteries of an infinite God who is fully engaged in the complexities of life.

As disciples, we are lifetime learners about all He has revealed to us – seen and unseen!

Jesus, Our Model of the Teacher/Disciple-Maker

Teaching can take many forms but our best example is, again, the Lord Himself. In the Gospels, we see Jesus using various forms of teaching, like preaching or lecture, stories and parables, and even miracles. **But when it came to forming His twelve chosen Disciples, He walked and ate with them, conversed and questioned them, listened to them, ministered alongside them, and reflected on their experiences with them.** He focused on interaction that would bring the Disciples to understanding, change, and skill. Jesus showed them what He meant, and then asked them to reflect on it with Him and with each

other. He engaged in mutual experiences and conversations with them so they would have more than rules to memorize and statements to forget.

Jesus and the Disciples were involved together so that they could discuss and gain understanding of their life experience as it came into contact with the new Kingdom realities with which they were confronted. Likewise, for the purpose of re-igniting discipleship in our lives and churches today, **we will focus on developing the kinds of teaching skills that involve life-on-life interactions with a small group of peer-learners. Teaching toward disciple-making.**

Reflection 1:5: *How have you understood the role of teaching in discipleship? What new insights have you gained?*

Jesus' Promise to Disciple-Makers

The Great Commission passage concludes in a way that affirms Jesus' ongoing involvement with them:

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (v. 20)

In context, this verse isn't meant primarily to be a blanket for every kind of fear or anxiety we face (although, God speaks to that elsewhere in His Word). This particular reminder specifically follows Jesus' command to make disciples. It is an encouragement specifically to those who would make disciples. Given the size of the task and what the Disciples had already been through, it's easy to imagine that they were feeling overwhelmed by the expression of Jesus' vision for their lives.

Surely part of Jesus' strategy in discipling them in a group was to give them shared experiences that would give them courage for later. They could support and remind each other of what they knew. The disciples had already faced persecution and suspicion due to their association with Jesus. It's likely that they felt fearful about the sacrifice and opposition this task would bring into their own lives, if they truly embraced it. **And so He reminds them together, not only of His authority, but also of His constant presence from now until the task is completed in the ages to come.** Involvement in the lives of people can be messy and exhausting, as well as fulfilling and inspiring. Jesus' promise of His presence is strengthening for all disciples in every age who embrace the privilege of making disciples as a lifetime pursuit and priority!

Reflection 1:6: *What new, reinforced, or in-process thoughts do you have about the Great Commission? What would you like to be different in your participation in it?*

Growing in our Discipleship Skills

We long to see others enjoy the freedom and security we have experienced in our own process of knowing God more deeply. And we also want to continue learning alongside those we disciple, just as Jesus' Disciples learned alongside each other. We can describe this process as peer-discipleship, relational learning, or group discipleship. The material that follows in the chapters to come will hopefully help us take hold of:

- What it means to learn and be a learner (or disciple),
- What it means to teach and also be a co-learner (or a disciple-maker),
- The value of a learning community or group of co-learners (the Body of Christ) who are guided by the Master (through His Spirit),
- Building on good content and guided discussion that moves us into understanding God's truth (God's Word) in our life experiences (God's learning context for us).

This material cannot do the work of discipleship on its own. It is designed to be used as a platform for discussion and mentoring in a group experience where you can live out and practice group discipleship, where you can see the black and white words come to life in discussion with others, and where you can unpack the rich opportunity of learning in relationship.

Group discipleship is the process of engaging with others as a learning community of peers who all desire to *"go on to the things of maturity,"* so that *"the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe."* (Eph 1:18-19)

Reflection 1:7: *What are you most hopeful about regarding your process as a disciple-maker?*

Conclusion

The truths that Jesus came to reveal, explain, and model have been entrusted to us. The process of discipleship that He prioritized and put in motion for the future of the Church depends on our response to it. **We want to clearly establish the crucial role of teaching others all that He taught, as essential to the true fulfillment of the Great Commission and the establishment of a healthy, multiplying church in every community.** Our hope is to gain God-ward vision, confidence, and preparation to move forward into teaching toward disciple-making!

ⁱ Bill Hull, *Jesus Christ Disciple-Maker* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004), 13.

ⁱⁱ Cloud and Townsend, *How People Grow*. (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 59-60.