

# Biblical Foundation for Making Disciples of Every People

By Marvin J. Newell

Making disciples of every people is a direct command from Christ. It is to be our first priority not because it was Jesus' last command, but because it is first and foremost His highest priority! It is central to what through the ages has become known as "The Great Commission."

## **"Make Disciples of All Peoples"**

Matthew 28:18-20 is where the command "make disciples of all peoples" is found. Jesus said it this way:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all peoples, 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."

A very important principle stands out from this instruction: the making of disciples is more than just the making of converts. Our mission is not complete when a person gives a simple assent to the gospel message. The raising of a hand, the walking of an aisle, an uttering of a sinner's prayer while a start, is not the culmination of the task. It is only the beginning. Granted, the good news is shared, and it is believed, but the mission doesn't stop there. Evangelism initiates the process of a person becoming a consistent follower of the Savior in whom they now believe. But this is not the full picture of making of disciples or even "discipleship" as some put it.

Making disciples is the process where mature believers build personal relationships with new believers for the purpose of producing growing and competent followers of Jesus. The process develops over a period of time and demands the context of nurturing. Producing authentic, lifelong followers of Jesus is thus the goal of making disciples. These individuals evidence their genuineness in the faith by their progress in spiritual maturity that in turn transforms their beliefs, behavior and worldview. Thus I suggest an appropriate definition of a disciple to be:

A consistent lifelong follower of Christ whose life is progressively being transformed into the image of Christ's. He joyfully walks with Christ, is constantly being informed by Scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit and other believers, with the chief end of glorifying God.

The making of a disciple then becomes a path rather than an achievement. Jesus' disciples understood firsthand what this discipleship process entailed. Over the past three years Jesus had lived with them, walked with them and told stories to them. They followed after Him and fellowshiped with Him as everyday experiences became lessons on loving God, loving others, and denying self. Thus they would have intuitively understood that all He had modeled to them, they were to do likewise for others.

## **The Three Essentials of Disciple Making**

Furthermore, we recognize that the depth of the task contains three essentials that comprise legitimate aspects of discipling peoples (Mt. 28:19-20): First, by reaching out - going to those who have little or no exposure to the gospel. Second, by bringing in - by gathering them into a relationship with Jesus and other believers that is evident by the outward sign of baptism. Third, by changing over - by teaching them to observe His commands, which in turn would change their former worldview and moral conduct, resulting in a transformed life. It is important that we examine these three essentials of making disciples a little more in depth.

### **1. First essential: Reaching out: "Go"**

The first essential in making disciples is to go out and encounter those who are not yet Christ followers. They may not yet be Christ followers because they have not yet had the opportunity to hear about Christ! Placed first in the sentence it indicates this is the first step in making disciples. It shows the duty of believers to take the gospel from where it is known and believed to where it is not known nor believed, to penetrate into every people group on earth.

### **2. Second essential: Bringing in: "Baptizing them"**

This is the task of gathering new believers into a relationship with Jesus and other believers, which is evidenced by the identifying rite of baptism. Jesus doesn't mean the practice of baptism as a magical rite that automatically brings people into relationship with God without a change of heart. Rather baptism is the culmination of the consolidation process of the repent-believe-baptize experience of salvation.

That believers are to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit demonstrates the believer's new relationship with the triune God. The names of the three persons of the Trinity are invoked in baptism to show the significance of all three in the salvation experience. God the Father is the author of grace, Jesus the provider of grace and the Holy Spirit the applicator of grace. The three work together in harmony to bring lost souls to the place of redemption. This Christian rite rightfully recognizes all three persons of the Godhead, and teaches the new believer that this is the God who now is to have their allegiance.

### **3. Third essential: Changing over: "Teaching them to obey"**

The making of a disciple does not stop with the initial belief experience nor the subsequent initiation experience. There is an educational process that follows to keep the new Christ-follower learning and growing in his/her new faith. It is important to see that there be an on-going growth experience. A new believer's worldview must be changed; his lifestyle adjusted to increasingly conform to the image of Christ; and his ethical conduct increasingly marked by integrity.

Teaching has a final goal - obedience so that transformation is experienced! New believers are taught with the goal that they become obedient followers of all Christ commanded. Among other things that Jesus taught, they are to live out the great

commandment (Mat. 22:37-40), show great compassion (Mat. 9:36), and engage in the great commission (Mat. 28:18-20).

This is why believers are congregated into local churches (and why some have labeled this passage the “church planting” commission). This is why missionaries have established Bible schools and seminaries the world over. This is why seminars, webinars, church based training and a host of other teaching ministries are so important. Growth happens best in the presence of other believers. It is the local church that best facilitates the fellowship of believers. Thus by implication the establishment of local congregations is an outcome of making disciples.

### **Superficial or genuine outcomes?**

Thus, all three activities – going, baptizing, teaching – are essential components of making disciples of every people. When done correctly, lives are genuinely changed for the better. This is the ultimate objective of making disciples – the transformation of lives. Transformed lives in turn transform communities, cultures and even whole countries.

However the lack of genuine changed lives has become the greatest omission of the Great Commission the world over! All too often “proselytes” are made instead of “disciples.” When this happens churches get filled with bodies who exhibit little evidence of changed beliefs and behaviors. This results in spiritually apathetic “believers” who quickly deteriorate into dysfunctional gatherings or become nominal Christians. They become victims of aberrant doctrine, heresy and deviant cults. Although they wear the label “Christian” many are not Christ-followers at all. They are superficial followers of “the way” in need of a conversion experience. This sad state has become the bane of the Church the world over. It causes skepticism when it comes to the validity of certain ministry reports. Although it is common to read reports about myriads of conversions and prolific church planting movements, what is the value of those reports if they do not evidence the bearing of the fruit of transformed lives? Superficial conversions and inflated statistics only promote non-authentic outcomes.

Therefore, it is incumbent on God’s messengers to engage in these three essential processes of making disciples. Taken together, they have the transformation of lives as the final goal. Only then are people genuinely disciples of Christ. Only then is the intended outcome of “making disciples” achieved among all people groups. Only then will sinful societies, corrupt cultures and degraded communities be transformed for the better.

### **Conclusion**

Just how best to make disciples has never been universally uniform nor has a predominant strategy been agreed upon. And that is good. Given the varied cultural contexts in which the gospel is being proclaimed, making disciples cannot be squeezed into a one-fits-all straight jacket. It is rightfully varied in methodology by Spirit-driven and creative believers the world over. What works best in one culture

does not mean it can be uncritically transferred to another. Each cultural setting demands its own unique disciple-making application. However, it has been universally proven that the best place for making disciples to happen is in conjunction with the local church.

Thus the task before us remains large, but not undoable. Penetrating, consolidating and transforming every people group remains our highest priority, too! By utilizing the opportunities and resources God has entrusted to us and by the means of prayer and the Holy Spirit, this generation has the ability to disciple every remaining people group. We can make disciples of every people in this generation - if we have the will to do so!

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