

**The Concept that
Determines Our Method**

Matthew 28:19

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"Turn men into disciples . . ." Matthew 28:19

If we are to be thoroughly obedient to Jesus Christ and His Great Commission, we must force ourselves to be technically accurate in understanding that Commission. We cannot afford ourselves the indulgence of ignorance or inaccuracy. We live "by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," and nowhere is that declaration more binding than with regard to the Great Commission. Since the only command in the Commission is to "turn men into disciples," it is incumbent upon us to know our job description as fully as we can know it.

What is a "disciple"? What is it to "make disciples"? I cannot imagine any questions that are more important for today's church, else we continue to ignorantly follow "Satan's subtle substitute" instead of obeying the Savior's strategy.

We have seen how vital vision is to spiritual function, and we have examined the Great Commission, the Commission which determines our Mandate. Now, we will investigate the "Concept" that determines our "Method." The concept is that of disciple-making.

In order to understand the concept fully, we need to explore a family of related words, some of which are actually used in the Bible, and some of which are "coined" from the Biblical words and their use.

Disciple-Making

The concept that determines our method is that of discipleship: "Turn men into disciples," Jesus commanded. Several key words call for our best attention.

Disciple

One is the word "disciple." "Disciples are both the people who please the Lord and the people who will reach the world. Therefore, a clear identification of a disciple is imperative. Understanding what a disciple is and what a disciple does are top priorities for the church. The irony of the church is that we throw the word "disciple" around freely, but too often with no definition. Such a condition is like a shoe company trying to produce a product without specifications. The product coming off the end of the assembly line would be interesting." (Hull; The Disciple Making Pastor, 54).

This word, "disciple," has been tragically reduced in the modern church, including everything from "convert" to "professing believer." Usually, "making disciples" is defined by "winning people to Christ." Soul-winning is a vital part, a beginning part, a necessary part, of disciple-making, but it is only a beginning. If the process stops with soul-winning, the sinner in question is not really "won" at all.

In the New Testament, the word is employed in several general ways, then in an increasingly narrow way. It is used, first, to describe a *casual listener*. All of those who came to hear Jesus at the

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beginning of His ministry are called "disciples." Then, it is used to describe a *convinced listener*, a person who consents that what he is hearing is true, though it may not substantially change his life or his lifestyle. Friends, the church today is full of people who meet these two descriptions. This comprises the vast congregation of "pew potatoes" who fill our churches Sunday after Sunday, but who have no power with God in changing the world, because they are not truly and deeply changed themselves.

The third use of the word "disciple" in the New Testament defines a *committed, lifelong, learner and follower*. This last use is the one Jesus intended in the Great Commission, and it constitutes our marching orders. We are to go everywhere and "turn men into *committed, lifelong, learners and followers of Jesus Christ*." You see, this meaning is inherent in the word "disciple." A disciple is an *adherent* (one who adheres, like adhesive tape, to another), or an *apprentice*, of Jesus Christ. Weigh each definitive word carefully. Indeed, spend some time exploring the words. A disciple is a *person in training*.

- Tertullian, one of the leaders of the early church, called Christians "pupils in God's school." A disciple is first born, then he is made. He is born by the Spirit of God with the right factory-installed equipment. But, then he must be built, trained, taught, and led to commitment to Jesus Christ.
- Waldron Scott, a great disciple-maker, wrote: "The very activity of developing new attitudes, acquiring new skills, formulating new relationships, discovering, daring, exploring, reforming, renewing—in short, learning—makes life the adventure Jesus promises it will be. If you're not learning, you're not living. It's as pure and simple as that."

However, even with such a quality statement, and by such a quality man, we must be gravely cautious. One dimension needs to be emphatically added to Scott's statement: *the focus of the learning and living is to be Jesus Christ, and the outcome is to be practical likeness to Jesus Christ*. A New Testament disciple is completely preoccupied with Jesus Christ so that this preoccupation consumes all lesser possibilities; and he is, thus, becoming more and more like Christ in a practical way—constantly teaching, constantly *ministering*, constantly *building people's lives*, constantly *correcting* where necessary, and constantly *going after the whole wide world!*

So, practical Christ-likeness is not the meek-mannered, timid, tame, insipid sentiment that we have thoughtlessly allowed in today's church. Eugenia Price was within range of a great truth when she said, "The greatest sin of today's church is that it has tamed Jesus Christ." Sam Shoemaker, about whom Billy Graham said, "He probably meant more to the institutional church world-wide than any man of his generation," once wrote: "It is not the main job of the church to turn out a lot of work, list a long string of members, or raise a lot of money. It is the main Job of the church to fashion people who behave like Jesus Christ—and that is not a mild lifestyle, nor is it a way people *don't* act. These Christlike people cannot be hewn out of mediocre mass wholesale, but only one by one."

Contrast our churches and their strategy today, in which the procedure is something like blowing up a mountain of granite and expecting to get a number of polished statues. Shoemaker continued: "Our churches should be stripped down to miniature organizations and thus afford pastors and laymen the opportunity to learn the great spiritual art of winning and training others. It seems an almost universal experience that unless one puts this kind of work first in his life, it will be crowded

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out entirely. Our minds, our emotions, the hours of our days, should be filled with a special group of individuals at all times—individuals we seek to win, individuals we seek to train in taking responsibility, individuals to whom we look ourselves for spiritual fellowship and help." This lifestyle was, of course, originally modeled by Jesus, and it should be mastered by us, also.

Knofel Staton wrote insightfully and incisively when he said, "Who is a disciple of Jesus and how do we make one? Without a clear picture of our objectives we will spin our wheels, use up our time and energy, and still not make any disciples." The word "disciple" is used 270 times in the Gospels and in the Book of Acts. The word does not occur again in the remaining 22 books of the New Testament. What is going on here? Why does the word disappear? What is the Holy Spirit saying? In Luke 6:40, Jesus said, "When the process is completed, the pupil will be like his teacher." So, we should expect some terms to emerge which picture advancing likeness. And, indeed, the "Christian" begins to be used. The word "saint"—one completely set aside to Christ's control—begins to emerge.

Discipler

A second key word is the word "discipler." A discipler, or disciple-maker, is a person who "turns men into disciples." A discipler is merely a maturing disciple, for one surely cannot be a disciple of Jesus while ignoring the only marching orders Jesus gave to His church. In short, it would seem to be impossible to be a disciple without being a discipler. A discipler is a co-learner who recruits and leads others as they are learning together.

Discipling

A third key word is the word "discipling." The command of Jesus to "make disciples" is loaded with implications based on Jesus' example and teaching. Discipling is the process of building men into disciples. Christopher Adsit, in his book Personal Disciple-Making, defines it as "seeking to fulfill the imperative of the Great Commission by making a conscientious effort to help people move toward spiritual maturity—drawing on the power and direction of the Holy Spirit, utilizing the resources of the local church, and fully employing the gifts, talents, and skills acquired over the years."

Discipling is done by *someone, not by something*. It is done by *persons, not by programs*. It is accomplished by *individuals, not by institutions*. Technically, discipling is one Christian person imparting his whole life to another, by example, leadership, and relationship. It always involves life transference.

There is a great deal of difference between *disinfecting sinners* and *discipling saints*. Most church work—pastoral work, worship, educational efforts, promotional efforts, etc.—results in the occasional disinfecting of sinners, but there is pitifully little true discipling of saints. Proof of the point? Very simply, most Christians in most churches have no more "spiritual clout" for Christ than they did the day before they were saved!

Disinfecting of sinners gets the sinner saved, then puts him in a spiritual safety deposit box from which he emerges as a tamed and decent human being. Discipling of saints, on the other hand,

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involves the qualitative construction of a saved individual so that individual will *change the world* by continuing the process.

The difference may be seen in this illustration. It involves a comparison between preaching and disciple-making. Suppose you have a person standing behind a line, holding a bucket of water in his hand. Twenty feet beyond the line, there are 20 small-mouth milk bottles. Preaching is like throwing the water out of the bucket from behind the line, hoping that some of the water enters the bottles. However, the efficiency of such a technique is fairly predictable: not much water will get into the bottles. Disciple-making, by comparison, is like taking the bucket of water to each milk bottle and pouring the water in close-up until the bottle is full. There is little question where the greater efficiency lies.

Or, preaching is like holding an eyedropper of medicine out a third-story window and dispensing it onto the street below, hoping some of it will hit somebody in the eye. Disciple-making, on the other hand, is personal, close-up application, like dispensing the medicine from the tip of the eyedropper directly into the needy eye.

Without a constant standard of discipling, we dispense the truth in a mass way and *count the people*—though we may be producing very few *people who count*. Discipling in a style like that of Jesus will correct that problem. When the disciples heard Jesus say that they were to "turn men into disciples," they had to interpret that to mean that they were to make out of others what Jesus had made out of them. Discipling includes the entire disciple-making process, from conversion to trained disciple-maker. This is the very heart of what Christ expects of His church.

Disciplines

A final key word is the word "disciplines." Disciplines are the areas of life that reveal the cost of discipleship. Hedson Taylor, the founder of the China Island Mission and one of the greatest visionary missionary-statesmen who has ever lived, wrote: "A man may be consecrated, dedicated and devoted, but of little value if undisciplined."

How serious is Christ's mandate? How extensive and serious is the church's failure to obey the one command of the Commission? Is there real evidence of such failure? I believe the evidence is prevailing and pervasive.

I was in a meeting years ago with a veteran, white-haired Christian who has long ago gone to Heaven. He and I were alone in his office for awhile, at which time he asked me what I was "doing these days" in the church of which I was pastor. I replied, "I'm doing everything I know to do to turn church members into world-visionary disciples who are, in turn, reproducers of other world-visionary disciples." He sadly replied to me, "Brother Hodges, I never had any success producing reproducers in any church where I was pastor." I asked, "Then what did you do?" He sadly replied, "I just went ahead and tried to do all the work myself." I cannot imagine a sadder self-judgement!

I was seated in a restaurant with three pastors as we were waiting for lunch to be served. We were talking (I suppose at my lead) about disciple-making. One fine pastor in the group made an honest assessment of his ministerial history (and he was a fine, leading evangelical pastor): "Herb, I look back over two long pastorates and I can only see two men in each of the two churches who might

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qualify as the kind of men you are defining." He was not in protest nor in anger when he spoke, only sadness. How tragic, but how typical! At best, we have been producing "good Christians," which often means extremely introverted people, instead of world-impacting, reproducing disciple-makers.

The apparent goal of Jesus was to produce "disciples" who would become "disciplers," engaged in a lifetime vocation of "discipling" others and practicing the daily "disciplines" which are necessary to fulfill that purpose.

Disciple-Making That Produces a Ministry of Multiplication

Then the New Testament adds another crucial dimension to our vocation. We are to be engaged in discipleship THAT PRODUCES A MINISTRY OF MULTIPLICATION. It was clearly Christ's intent that each disciple be engaged in a multiplying ministry. What is multiplication? Multiplication is when disciplers start producing other visionary, world-impacting disciplers. You see, God's plan is to *reach* the world exactly the same way it was *populated*—by *multiplication*. In Genesis 9:1, God said, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth." Someone said this was the first order ever given to man, and the *only* one he has obeyed. Jesus' evangelistic mandate is essentially the same as God's biological mandate.

Why do men fail to multiply biologically?

1. Some never marry, or there is no union of the sexes; and, thus, multiplication does not occur.
2. Some suffer from disease or impairment to some vital reproductive part of the body.
3. Some don't multiply because of immaturity. You simply don't know any three-year-old fathers! The reproductive organs are present, but they are not sufficiently developed to allow reproduction. Babies don't reproduce.

The same deficiencies account for the failure to multiply spiritually. When there is no union between a Christian and Jesus Christ on a consistent basis, there will be little or no spiritual multiplication. The presence of sin in a believer's life will also impede the process of multiplication. And, the stalemating of a Christian in spiritual babyhood will prevent multiplication. Paul said, "I wrote unto you as unto Babes in Christ." And the baby Christians in Corinth missed the world-impacting standard of spiritual multiplication.

Spiritual multiplication is God's planned vision for reaching our present world and all future generations through those we win and train now. The strategy of Jesus' ministry was evident: He looked at the masses through the man; then He built the man to impact the masses. He ministered to everyone before Him—but He only recruited for His Kingdom's sake. How we have distorted these standards in building institutions instead of individuals. Jesus loved each individual, to be sure, but He always looked beyond His disciples to the men they would reach and train (see John 17:20).

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In Acts 2:41, 47 and Acts 5:14, the word "added" defines God's mathematical strategy at the very beginning of church history. However, in Acts 6:1, we read that "the number of the disciples was multiplied greatly so that a great company of priests . . ." Then, by Acts 9:31, we read that "the churches . . . were multiplied." Apparently, the church never returned to mere additions unless it went out on the frontier and had to begin all over again, and even then it quickly moved back to multiplication.

When a person my age is reunited with a college of seminary classmate whom he hasn't seen since school days, several key questions are usually asked: "Are you married?" "Do you have any children?" "How many children?" "Do you have any grandchildren?" And, if the persons are old enough, they ask, "Do you have any great-grandchildren?"

When we stand at the Judgement Seat of Christ, we may well hear these same questions: Do you have any children (and if not, why not)? How many children? Then the real test of our participation in Jesus' plan begins: Do you have any grandchildren, people who are Christians because of the way you built your own spiritual children? And, do you have any spiritual great-grandchildren? It will not be satisfying to know that we ministered to vast numbers and a few became producers. It will only be satisfying if we have spent our lives seeking to make out of our disciples *what Jesus make out of His*.

In order to be sure we see the true standard and understand the seriousness of failure to follow it, let me conclude this chapter on a very serious, even negative, note. The well-known book, The Bridge Over the River Kwai, was made into an even better-known movie by the same title. They were suggested by Ernest Gordon's excellent book, Miracle On the River Kwai, although the book and movie about the bridge are fictional take-offs from the original.

The Bridge Over the River Kwai tells the story of a British colonel captured by the Japanese during World War II. In the concentration camp in a Burmese jungle, hundreds of hopeless prisoners languished near death. The English officer came up with a creative plan to improve morale and give the captives something to love for. Near the camp, the enemy was constructing a railroad bridge. The prisoners would take over the task. They would work with arrogant efficiency and show the Japanese what English ingenuity could do! Dedicating himself and his soldiers to the job, the British leader saw morale change. The goal of building the bridge became his magnificent obsession. Finally, the crossing was finished. As the first Japanese supply team chugged across the structure, the proudly-patrolling colonel spied Allied commandos in the river bed under the bridge about to demolish the bridge. Because of his private obsession, he screamed to warn the Japanese commander and ran frantically down the river, trying to stop the saboteurs.

Isn't the analogy clear? Many churches languish near death, so their leaders come up with one plan after another, program upon program, to improve morale and give the members something to keep them motivated. In short, they engage in survival strategies, a classic example of institution-building. Just as in the story, the enemy has his own program, and he is happy to enlist us in its "fulfillment." We often take over his plan with a vengeance. The goal of "building the bridge" becomes our magnificent obsession. When anyone suggests that this is more of Satan's substitute than it is the Savior's strategy, we turn on him as if he were our enemy. So obsessed have we become with institution-building programs that we have forgotten that there is *a battle bigger than*

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the bridge going on. Like little children playing make-believe games, we skip breathlessly through life largely missing the original mandate of Jesus.

In the spring of 1991, I spent a week in a Texas church, preaching at night on themes that support the disciple-making process, and teaching in the noontime services the process itself. The pastor of this church emerged from the ministry of a church I had earlier served a pastor. On the final evening, a young married couple approached me moments before the service began, and as we talked, the wife placed a folded letter in my hand. In part, the letter said: "I don't know if you know it or not, but I am one of your spiritual grandchildren. Our pastor has been discipling me and my husband for about four years." Then there is a section of personal information and another section in which she rehearses and applies the message of each evening of that week. Then she writes:

"Thank you for the extra time you've spent teaching us about discipleship. I'm afraid I'm a lot like the brother who confessed in tears in a noon service that he had been a Christian for a long time, but had never really discipled anyone. I've witnessed to several after learning and being with our pastor, but I'm now anxious for my first disciple to come into my life. This week has been a *turning point* in my life, and I appreciate you letting God use you to minister and challenge me. I plan, with Jesus working through me, to make you a spiritual great-grandfather. Thank you so much for coming! Your sister and Grandchild in Christ, (signature)."

The practical New Testament realities suggested by the sentiment of that letter comprise the marching orders Jesus gave to His church. Add the dimensions of spiritual reproduction, world vision, and the practical process of making disciples, and you have made a giant stride toward the fulfillment of His mandate.

In May of 1983, a Southern Baptist seminary periodical carried a sad, even tragic story. I will withhold the names of the persons involved, though they were recorded in the story. "When missionaries . . . wrote a book about being thrown out of . . . , they were forced to ask themselves what they really left behind. The answer knocked the wind out of them. They realized that they had only scattered seeds, not planted them. Even more sobering was their realization that Christians everywhere were making the same mistake: baptizing multitudes, but not making disciples. 'We haven't made disciples,' the missionary told a chapel audience. 'We have simply had professions of faith. We have them sitting in pews all over America and around the world. It's fairly easy to baptize folks. It's a different ball game to make disciples. It seems to me that the church and God have two different plans of operation. The church has speakers and listeners, neither of which are the 'doers' that Jesus calls Christian to be. We need to get in on God's program.'"

This account probably generalizes the problem as if all Christians were equally blameworthy, and it surely oversimplifies the solution. This book is also guilty of both faults. However, it does address a crucial failure in the church at large, and it does remind us of the one strategy Jesus gave.

It is never too late to begin doing what is right—what we have been commanded to do. Anyone can "go back to Square One" and begin the multiplication process. However, most of us would need to give ourselves immediately to a vocation of studying the life and ministry of Jesus, asking, "How did He do it with His men?," and studying also the great works on the disciple-making, multiplying process. I would suggest beginning with Robert Coleman's Master Plan of Evangelism, then Leroy

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Eims' The Lost Art of Disciple-Making. These need to be read over and over. From that point, the specialized works available today would occupy the most serious disciple-maker for the rest of his life.

I can envision a growing army of world-visionary, world-impacting, reproducing multipliers whose entire history is a commitment to Jesus' Commission to "turn men into disciples." May God recruit and deploy that army before our very eyes.