

Part 5 of this series on *The Church* is entitled, Our Mission. Dictionaries define the word “mission” in a variety of ways, from the operational task of a military unit to the missionary work of a religious organization or denomination. For our purpose, mission refers to the primary task or duty of the church, as articulated by its Leader, Jesus Christ. Just as Jesus succinctly presented His mandate for the church in *The Great Commandment* found in Matthew 22:37-39, Christ also succinctly presented His mission for the church in *The Great Commission* found in Matthew 28:19-20. *The Great Commission* developed into a term used by Christians worldwide not long after missionaries coined the phrase in the 18th century. The words, commission and mission, are certainly related, but they are not synonyms. Think of it this way: Christ has given His church a mission to carry out, and He has commissioned His followers to complete the task under His authority. His Mission is Our Mission.

Let’s now explore the meaning of *The Great Commission*, and our responsibility to carry it out, in the context of Matthew 28:16-20. These are the last words of Jesus recorded by Matthew, as the writer concludes the gospel that bears his name. The scene is Galilee, sometime between the resurrection of Jesus and His ascension into heaven. Verse 16 says, “the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.” Judas, who committed suicide after realizing that he had betrayed Jesus, is not there, but the other apostles are present. The mountain that Jesus designated is not specified. The next verse goes on to say that when they saw Jesus, “they worshiped Him, but some were doubtful.” Given the fact that Jesus had risen from the dead, it is understandable that His apostles worshiped Him. What is surprising, is that this verse goes on to say, “some were doubtful.” What prompted their doubt? We might find the answer by asking ourselves that same question. Knowing that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, as recorded in the Bible and validated by your personal experience, do you ever doubt? The truth is that our faith is a work in progress, and doubt enters in on our journey to spiritual maturity.

The last three verses in the Gospel of Matthew begin with Jesus declaring His authority to issue the command that follows. By saying, “All authority is given to Me in heaven and on earth,” Jesus presents Himself as Supreme Ruler over all creation. God the Father imparted all of His authority to God the Son; therefore, although the Son is subordinate to the Father, they are coregents with equal power and authority. Jesus makes this bold statement, because He wants His hearers to be especially attentive to what He is about to say. As Commander-in-Chief of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ is about to give His *Great Commission*, and all who serve Him are expected to obey His command. The divine command Jesus issues is one word in Greek, but translated in English with two words: “Make disciples.” Verses 18 and 19 are joined by the adverb, “therefore.” When this word of transition appears, readers should ask, “What is it *there for*?” In answer, Jesus could be paraphrased as saying, “I am the Ultimate Authority; *therefore*, as Commander-in-Chief of the universe, you need to hear and heed My command that follows.” The closing words of any author are intended to make a point and leave a lasting impression. Matthew’s intent, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is for all disciples of Christ to clearly understand the mission of Jesus from the lips of Jesus, which is to make disciples in His likeness.

The Greek word for disciple appears 269 times in the New Testament as a noun (*mathetes*), just four times in the form of a verb, and only once (Matthew 28:19) as an imperative, which is a verbal command. For example, when an officer orders a soldier to “Sit” or “Stand” or “Shoot,” the subordinate complies immediately. In like manner, when Jesus directs His disciples to “Disciple,” He expects them to do so. It’s worth noting that His disciples are told to disciple in the same way that soldiers

are told to soldier. It's also worth noting that in just four Greek words, *matheteusate panta ta ethne* (Disciple all the nations), Jesus gives His mission-vision statement, not only for 11 disciples present at that time, but for all disciples of Christ at all times. Regarding the meaning of the Greek word Jesus employs in His command, there is often confusion over what it means to be a disciple or learner. In the modern era, we tend to think of a learner as someone enrolled in an academic course with a teacher in charge of instructing and evaluating coursework. Sometimes, there's no personal relationship between the student and teacher. Almost always with online courses, there's no relationship at all. Not so for the disciples of Jesus, or other rabbis of that time, whose students not only knew their teachers personally, but sought to become like them in character, competence and conduct.

The main verb, "Disciple," is supported by three participles that describe the kind of action Jesus is calling His disciples to perform. The first one, usually translated as "go" in English, is in the passive voice. Literally, Jesus is saying, "As you are going, disciple all the nations." In other words, Christ is calling His followers to take the message and ministry He gave to them and, as they go through life, give it anyone from anywhere willing to receive it. The other participles ("baptizing" and "teaching") are in the active voice, describing specifically what Jesus is calling His followers to do as they "disciple all the nations." The word, "baptizing," is a transliteration of the Greek word, *baptizo*, which means to submerge or immerse something or someone in water. Jesus is not referring here to the baptism of John with repentance in view, but the symbolic identification with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection. The image is of us, as believers, standing with Jesus at the cross, trusting in Him to die for our sins as we die to our sins (see Galatians 2:20). We then join with Him in the grave, represented by submersion in water, which symbolically covers the sin we trusted Christ to take upon Himself. Finally, our rising from the waters of baptism symbolize our resurrection from the dead to new life in Christ and with Christ. This imagery is depicted plainly in Romans 6:3-10. Baptism, which is simply an outward expression of inward faith, followed immediately after conversion in the early church (e.g. Acts 2:36-41; 8:12, 26-38; 10:45-48; 16:14-15, 30-33; 18:8). Therefore, since baptism follows conversion, by commanding His disciples to practice this symbolic rite, Jesus is calling them first to proclaim His good news of salvation. This intent is articulated clearly in the closing words of Jesus found in Mark 16:15, where the Lord tells His disciples to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." So, our first step in making disciples is to share the good news we received, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, NAS). By saying that converts are to be baptized "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," Jesus denotes the nature of God as a Triune Being, with distinct roles, but one spiritual essence. The fact that baptism should be done in the "name" (not names) of the Triune God, underscores God's oneness and Christ's divinity.

The final verse in the Gospel of Matthew opens with Jesus directing His disciples to lead new converts from spiritual birth to spiritual growth. The participles, "going" and "baptizing" are followed here with "teaching." In the same way that a newborn baby must be nurtured to mature physically, newborn believers must be nurtured to mature spiritually. So, after someone trusts Christ as Savior, by means of you giving the gospel you had received, your next responsibility is to help that person grow in his/her faith. The Greek word translated into English as "teaching" means to instruct someone, especially in a verbal and personal manner. "Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" means that Jesus expects His disciples to teach others to

know and do all that they have learned from Him. Returning to the comparison of newborn babies and newborn believers, nurture must be comprehensive for both to mature in their character, competencies and conduct necessary for them to be all they can and should be. All loving and responsible parents want their children to become loving and responsible adults, who in turn raise their children to do likewise. This is no less true for spiritual parents as it is for natural parents, and is what the Apostle Paul means in his letter to Timothy, when he writes, “the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2, NAS).

In light of the fact that some of His disciples were doubtful, the mission Jesus gives to His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 would have seemed intimidating, to say the least. Like most children who find themselves on their own for the first time, these men don't feel fully ready for what lies ahead. To make things even worse, Jesus has spoken of His departure from them into heaven, which will happen soon (see John 16:5). Knowing their doubts and feelings of inadequacy, Jesus comforts them by saying, “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Though they will not see Him after His ascension, Jesus wants His disciples to know that He will be with them, working in them and through them by the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. These closing words of Jesus were meant to encourage His disciples then, as much as they are meant to encourage His disciples now.

In spite of the fact that Jesus demonstrated the ideal example of discipleship for His apostles to replicate and the early church to imitate, evangelical churches of the modern era have not followed suit. This is surprising given the example we have of Jesus that is presented and preserved in the New Testament, but understandable given the fact that culture influences beliefs and behaviors more than anything else. Thus, instead of following the personal model of discipleship demonstrated by Christ, churches have adopted the impersonal model of modern academic institutions that focus on getting as much information to as many students as possible, giving a test to measure competency in the moment, and then moving them on to the next level. In this model, the learning experience is cognitive, but not very personal or practical. Like countless others, this was my experience both in school and in church. I don't recall a school teacher taking time to personally tutor me, and I don't recall a mature Christian taking time to personally disciple me. The reality is that Christians don't disciple others the way Jesus did, because no one disciplined them the way Jesus did. We cannot give what we have not first received. How can we break this cycle?

Immediately after my conversion I wanted to grow in my newly discovered faith more than anything. Although I didn't have a Christian investing in me personally and setting an example for me to follow, I did have the example of Jesus in the Bible. So, over the course of years and a lot of trial and error, I began to disciple others by simply giving what I was getting from my experience with Christ. My career as an officer in the Coast Guard and Army was very helpful, because the military training conducted by officers and non-commissioned officers resembles the spiritual training conducted by Jesus. For instance, Army leadership is built around a “Be, Know, Do” model. New recruits, like new converts, become part of a new community right after taking an oath. Immediately, young men and women start learning what it means to be a soldier from those who are experienced soldiers. These leaders teach their new “disciples” all they need to know about the Army way of life and how to do their respective jobs. Officers and NCOs lead by example and invest personally in their subordinates with the expectation of their subordinates eventually doing the same. This is how Jesus practiced discipleship. This is how we must practice discipleship.