

Go Therefore And Make Disciples
Matthew 28:18-19
Randy Pope
Part 1

Hopefully those of us in the PCA will agree that a church's focus should be on health, not growth. We too would agree that if the church is healthy, it will grow to its appropriate size, determined by God's design for that church. And lastly, we would hopefully agree that the most important growth is that which comes from making new disciples.

It is this last hopeful agreement that brings us to our text, Matthew 28:18-19. It is best known as "The Great Commission." Allow me to begin in part one by addressing "The Meaning of The Great Commission." In part two, we will discuss "The Priority Of The Great Commission."

The Meaning Of The Great Commission

As many well-studied PCA family members would know, our text is comprised of one imperative and three participles. For those who have forgotten middle and high school grammar, an "imperative" is "something of utmost importance" or "a command". A "participle" is defined as "a verb used as an adjective", and often referred to as an "ing verb". In our text, it is used to describe how one goes about accomplishing the imperative of making disciples.

To make a disciple of Christ is to make a follower out of a non-follower. Our text in no way suggests that this is making a strong believer out of a weak one (as important as that may be).

There are three participles in our text telling us how one goes about making true followers (which is actually telling us, His disciples, how He makes new disciples using us). The three step process is as follows:

1) "Going"

Literally, our text says, "As you are going". We must initiate the process, not waiting for the lost to come to us, asking us to make them into disciples of Jesus.

I refer to this step as initiating by means of "greeting" and "befriending".

2) "Baptizing"

When studying the etymological meaning of this word, it refers to "identifying with". In the context of Matthew 28, it means to identify with Jesus as to His claim to be the one and only savior.

This second step in making disciples almost always requires an attractive "invitation" to investigate the claims of Jesus. This "inviting" could have numerous options:

- To read something which explains the gospel,
- To attend something where the non-follower becomes attractively exposed to God's Word and God's people, or
- To investigate the claims of Christ – either one on one or in a small group.

The "invite" to investigate is, in my opinion, the most fruitful of all – and definitely is preferred when seeking to make disciples of non-religious, secular, humanists.

3) "Teaching"

Notice our text says "teaching them to observe all things", not "teaching them all things". Thus, the non-follower must first agree with the claims of Jesus, that He is the true Savior who alone can forgive sin. But notice in our text that he must also submit to actually following Jesus, making Him Lord of his life.

Thus the one sharing this "good news" must make sure that the non-follower has been clearly taught the necessity of following (submitting to)

Jesus – thus the requirement “to observe whatsoever Jesus commands.” I like to say it this way, “You can’t be a follower without following.”

I was recently asked by an out-of-town friend if I would try to meet a non-Christian friend of his living in Atlanta near me. His hope was that I could lead him to Jesus. I agreed to do so. Immediately, my first step was “to go”. This meant “meeting” and “greeting” him. I then took the necessary steps to “invite” him to have lunch with me. Fortunately, I was equipped with what I call an inviting “tool” which enticed him to meet with me for four consecutive weeks to investigate the claims of Jesus. After three weeks, he came to the place of believing that Jesus was the Son of God and the only Savior of sinners. Thus, he now had identified with Jesus’ claims.

Next, I had the task to make very clear to him that to become a true follower of Jesus, he must come to the place of following Jesus (a work of God’s grace).

At our fourth luncheon, He told me he had bowed the knee to Jesus and that he believed he had become a true follower. He is now in my discipleship group and preparing to join our church.

How helpful to follow God’s plan for making disciples given in Matthew 28. This plan to “go”, “baptize” and “teach” is easily utilized when embracing a simple strategy such as “greet”, “befriend” and “invite”.

It is my opinion that every church’s leadership must make certain their church is providing the three mentioned options for “inviting” – something to read, something to attend, and the equipping necessary to enable non-followers to investigate Jesus’ claims.

So let me ask, have you had the privilege to make disciples, seeing them embrace the incredible love and forgiveness of God? If a pastor or ruling elder, does your church offer the equipping necessary for your people to become effective disciple makers?

I encourage all who are using these devotional readings to ask God to provide whatever is necessary to use you and your church to make new disciples of Jesus – not “in order that” God will love you, but “because He loves you”.

In part two of our devotional, I will address "The Priority Of The Great Commission."

Prayer

Almighty God and heavenly Father, thank You for the free offer of salvation through Your Son Jesus. Thank You for offering Your Son to pay the penalty for my sins. May You use me and my local church, as well as the entire PCA, to come alive with a passion to make disciples. Would You please provide everything necessary to do so. May we be a people and a church which exemplifies Your heart and practice "to leave the 99 in order to reach the one lost sheep." Thank You so much for those You used in Your search for me and for eventually bringing me into Your family. Amen

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In part one of our devotional "Go Therefore And Make Disciples", I addressed "The Meaning Of The Great Commission". We now look at its priority.

The Priority Of the Great Commission

As we celebrate our PCA's 50th anniversary, we should rejoice in all God has done through this portion of the body of Christ. But at the same time, we must continue to ask ourselves the hard questions which bring a pause, so as to consider what weaknesses need to be addressed. This is extremely important if we are going to strive to make the bride of Christ as beautiful as she can possibly be. In doing so, I think most of us who love the PCA would admit that making disciples is not one of our strengths to be celebrated.

I had the honor to preach during one of the evening worship services during the PCA's 2006 General Assembly. The title of my message that night was "The PCA: A Missional Church?"

The previous year to that assembly, the PCA recorded a net growth of 74 members. But as I said in part one of this devotional, church growth is not the critical issue. However, what was disturbing is that during that same year, it took 47 PCA church members to reach 1 new member joining by profession of faith (and that number includes children and youth who joined by profession). In addition, our data from the stated clerk's office revealed that only 8 churches in the PCA had averaged more than 35 new members (including children and youth) by profession of faith over the previous 5 years.

Though I do not have current data, I think it safe to say that our effectiveness in making disciples has only gotten worse over the past 16 years. In part, this discouraging

reality could be explained by the shifting of our national culture, embracing a more secularistic world and life view. Regardless of the cause of our ineffectiveness to make disciples, we must address this problem.

The great commission is our Savior's passion. He declared such when He said, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." With this being the case, we must ask ourselves the question "Why would the members of the PCA be so ineffective at making disciples?"

I would suggest a two-fold problem across Christendom and certainly including our beloved PCA. The first problem has to do with our "mindset". The second problem can be explained by the absence of a needed "toolset". Let's look at these two.

What is meant by "the need for a missional mindset"? I am referring to a way of thinking which views obedience to Jesus' command in Matthew 28 to be a life-or-death issue. A life-or-death mindset is that which was demonstrated by those preparing to be church planters in Calvin's seminary, knowing that in doing so, the life expectancy of a church planter was approximately 5 years. This is the same mindset demonstrated by America's earliest missionaries who packed their belongings in their own caskets, assuming to never return until shipped home in those caskets.

A few years ago, I asked two small groups of believers to write down a list of reasons Christians should share their faith with lost people. Of all the many good answers listed, none mentioned the reality that without becoming believers, people perish and spend an eternity in hell.

On occasion, I have heard of the death of a loved one of one of our church members. Upon contacting that member to share my condolences, I hear words of appreciation followed by statements like this. "It really was good that my father went ahead and passed away because he had been living a long time with so much pain." Upon hearing such a statement by a believer, I have commented, "Oh, your dad was a Christian." To my shock I have heard something like, "Well, he would not have said he was a believer and we never saw any evidence of salvation." In response, in order to pastor well, I would withhold my thoughts, but would certainly be thinking, "Do you actually believe that his temporal pain on earth could ever be worse than an eternity in hell?"

Lost people perishing in hell is only the first of a long list of reasons to make disciples, including to give glory to God by obeying His Word. But for sure, without the proper mindset, Christians will more than likely never be faithful or fruitful in making disciples.

The second problem I mentioned is what I referred to as the absence of an effective "missional toolset." Imagine wanting to try your hand at building a piece of furniture, but having no tools. Perhaps the wood has been procured along with the necessary screws and nails. But what if you had no saw, screwdriver or hammer? A willing mindset and all the effort imagined could never produce a piece of furniture. And even with the required tools available, you would certainly need someone experienced in carpentry to assist by equipping you for your task. The same is true regarding making disciples. Given the right mindset, the appropriate tools and adequate equipping, believers become obedient to the great commission and become fruitful disciple makers.

What is your mindset? What kind of tools do you presently have in your toolbelt? What kind of equipping have you pursued so as to become confident in the use of your tools as you seek to obey the commission of Your Savior to "go and make disciples?"

Prayer

Gracious Lord, thank you for including your people in the process of directing Your lost sheep into Your eternal fold. Forgive me for neglecting Your call on my life to make disciples. Forgive me for not diligently pursuing the acquiring of the tools and equipping necessary to successfully rescue the sheep Your Son came to seek and to save. Please use me to labor on Your behalf, glorifying You by making disciples of non-believers. Amen