

“Disciples Make Disciples”: A Vital Truth That Needs Further Elaboration

July 6, 2018

by David Schrock

“Disciples make disciples”

It’s an axiom that is thrown around by Christians who rightly make “making disciples” a priority for genuine discipleship. But is it really true? Do disciples make disciples? Or is there more to the story?

Based on the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, we might think that Jesus words give definitive answer: Yes, disciples make disciples.

Yet, Jesus’ final words in Matthew’s Gospel are not the only word on the subject. And in fact, as we seek to make disciples—as we are commanded—we should remember that our calling to make disciples is part of God’s larger work of redemption. This should both encourage us, motivate us, and remind us that the work of making disciples is not the mission of few committed “disciple-makers,” it is the calling for all those who call Jesus “Lord,” and thus something we should all strive to grow in.

Who Makes Disciples?

The answer to that question is at least least fourfold. And only as we remember each link in the chain will we rightly understand our role in the process. So lets consider where disciples come from and then labor to take up the mantle to make disciples with God, in the church, as maturing disciples who make disciples with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

First, God makes disciples.

As with everything in creation, God is antecedent. That is, there is nothing that comes into existence that God has not ordained. And there is nothing good that God is not the source. As James 1:17 says, God is the Father of lights from whom every good gift comes. Likewise, in a context of discipleship, John 15:5 says, “I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, *for apart from me you can do nothing.*”

Apart from God, we can do nothing. And this certainly means, we cannot make disciples. Only the Father can predestine a child to salvation (Acts 13:48). Only the Son can call his sheep by name (John 10:3–5, 27). Only the Spirit can raise the dead to life (Romans 8:11). And in disciple-making *all* of these things must happen—disciple-making is not the mere maturation of immature people; it is the creation of a new life in Christ. Therefore, disciples cannot make disciples unless God grants it (John 6:44, 65).

Conceivably, God can create disciples without human means (see Luke 3:8), but the reverse is not true. Men cannot make disciples without the life-giving power of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, as we seek to make disciples, we must remember that we are participating in God's work (1 Cor 3:6–7). Therefore, he deserves all the praise for making disciples and we must pursue disciple-making with God and as the Bible commands—with prayer and preaching the Word.

Second, the gospel makes disciples.

If God is the one who makes disciples, he makes disciples with means. And throughout the Bible the repeated testimony is that God makes disciples with his Word. In the Old Testament we see how the word of God raises dead bones to life (Ezekiel 37). And in the New Testament we have multiple passages that testify to the power and necessity of God's Word.

For instance, Jesus cites Isaiah 54:13 to speak of the efficacy of the new covenant proclamation: "It is written in the Prophets, 'And they will all be taught by God.' *Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.*" Likewise, Paul says in Romans 10:14–17 that salvation must come in response to the preaching of the Word: "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (v. 17). Then in James 1:18, the brother of Christ states that God "brought us forth by the word of truth." And again, Peter confirms this theology of the word, when he says we are born again by the seed of the word (1 Peter 1:22–25). In short, God's word is what creates new creatures in Christ, and no spiritual life is granted without his word.

Just as Christ came preaching the gospel (Matt 4:17), calling men to follow him (vv. 18–22), he tells his disciples to go be fishers of men. And how do Christ's disciples make disciples? With the word! Only through the gospel they received from Christ can disciples make disciples. Indeed, it is not through good works, social justice, or a plethora of loving actions that we make disciples. Disciples are made by the word of God alone.

Truly stated, disciples will do much more than preach the gospel (see Matthew 25), and these things are often needed to gain a hearing for the gospel (see 1 Peter 3:15), but disciples will only make disciples as they share the gospel. It is the word of God which is the seed of life. And thus disciples who want to make disciples must give priority to the word of God and prayer. Just as Jesus says in John 15:7–8,

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Third, the church makes disciples.

While our Western individualism and ministry models often focus on personal disciple-making (i.e., individuals making individual disciples), it is the church who is commissioned to make disciples. Of course, the church is made up of individuals, and certain Christians are uniquely gifted in disciple-making, but there are two reasons to stress the corporate nature of disciple-making.

First, it is the church that recognizes who disciples are.

When Jesus says in Matthew 28 to go and make disciples, he immediately follows this command with this statement, "baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Apparently, Jesus understood (and therefore commanded) his disciples to identify

disciples through water baptism. In other words, disciples are not autodidacts who grant themselves the title “disciple.” Rather, disciples are followers of Christ by means of following other disciples (see 1 Cor 11:1). Likewise, disciples who have been gathered together by baptism (what we know as churches) are recognized by their faith in Christ and received into the church through baptism.

For this reason, discipleship is not a purely individualistic event. It is a team event, a relay, if you will, where one generation of disciples recognizes the next. As Acts demonstrates when the gospel was preached, converts to Christianity were baptized and added to the church. As Luke records, the word of God went forward, creating disciples who were in turn organized into local churches. From this history of disciple-making in Acts, we learn that disciple-making is the church’s “thing.”

The keys of the kingdom were given to Christ’s local assemblies to baptize believers and exercise discipline when disciples proved to be false witnesses (see Matt 16:19–20; 18:15–17). Accordingly, we should never divorce discipleship from the local church. And the church must never forget its first priority to make disciples by preaching the gospel, to recognize disciples in baptism, and to mature disciples so that they might make more disciples.

Second, it is the church that has all the gifts needed to mature disciples.

Indeed, there is only one person who ever possessed all the gifts of the Spirit. His name is Jesus. For everyone else, we possess various gifts for the edification of Christ’s body.

This partial distribution of gifts has massive implications for discipleship. Any Christian who is only “discipled” by one other person, will be grossly deficient in the gifts God has for them to grow in Christ. Indeed, as Ephesians 4:11–16 teaches, “gifts” in the biblical sense are people. And every individual needs more than one or two “disciplers.” Likewise, the maturing disciple needs more gifts than a Bible study or a niche Christian ministry can provide. Only the body of Christ, with its diverse set of generations, cultures, and gifts can mature the disciple of Christ in all the ways God designs.

In other words, the church is the wisdom of God to display his glory (Ephesians 3:10–11). And the church is the place where individual believers are meant to grow. Each part of the body of Christ needs the other parts, and only as we live out our discipleship in the full complement of Jesus’ church body will we grow as disciples. Accordingly, mature disciples are made by the church. Likewise, mature disciples know (how) they are to make disciples.

Fourth, *mature disciples make disciples.*

While the maxim “disciples make disciples” is true, as far as it goes, it is short-sighted in itself. Just as young children are not physically mature enough to reproduce and raise children, so too, spiritually immature disciples may not be ready to make disciples. To be sure, some of the most effective evangelists are new disciples. But even when a new disciple is an effective evangelist, he or she is far from being an effective disciple-maker. This again shows the wisdom and goodness of the church, where young evangelists have a community with older, wiser saints.

As Jesus instructs his disciples in Matthew 28:20, those who make disciples must also instruct them to obey all that Jesus taught. Effective disciple-makers must know what Jesus has taught and (generally speaking) how to instruct others in the ways of Christ. Can you see why

disciple-making is a team event? No single person is fully equipped to make disciples. Disciple-making is a church project, and mature disciples know this.

Mature disciples know the gospel and they know how the gospel creates the church. Conversely, they know how the church builds up the body of Christ—a people made up of Christ’s disciples. And when a group of mature disciples gathers to worship, grow, serve, and preach Christ from the Scriptures, there will be (as God allows and ordains) a group of immature disciples who are growing into the likeness of Christ with those who are more mature.

Indeed, this is the beauty and health of a disciple-making church. There are mature disciples who are sharing Christ, so that they are seeing new disciples made. Then, in fulfillment of Jesus words, these mature disciples will pray, labor in the Word, and live life together such that young disciples are growing into maturity. In this way *mature* disciples make disciples.

God-Dependent, Word-Centered, Church-Oriented, Maturing Disciples . . . Make Disciples

So, again we ask: Do disciples make disciples? Absolutely!

But let us not forget that personal disciple-making plays a part in the larger work of Christ. Ultimately, the triune God is making disciples. And he is making disciples with his word for growth in his church. And in this context of maturity, community, and gospel growth are individuals most effective as disciple-makers.

Therefore, let us strive to be the kind of disciples who trust in the Lord, who proclaim the Word, who lean into the church, and who help others know more of Christ. That is what a more comprehensive look at Scripture teaches us about disciple-making.

To take steps forward in discipleship, the next Theology Thursday will be discussing this topic. All men are invited to join us. This month we will look at the subject of discipleship through the lens of two books. The first is *Discipling* by Mark Dever; the second is *The Master’s Plan of Evangelism* by Robert Coleman. Pick up one or both from the bookshelf at church, and join us on July 19 at 7pm to discuss how we can grow as disciples who make disciples.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds

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