

Series: Vision Month 2022

Title: Discipleship

Text: Matthew 28:18-20

Date: January 30, 2022

In 2016, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) commissioned a task force to study the reasons for the decline in church attendance amongst its churches. The commission was significant, given that it signified a startling problem amongst the largest conservative, evangelical affiliation of churches within the United States. With over 14 million members, convention leaders signaled a problem within their ranks.¹

When the findings of the task force's research were revealed, priority was placed on discipleship. The SBC admitted it had promoted one biblical task while neglecting another. It was reported that a healthy regard for discipleship had unwittingly been stifled by a myopic focus on evangelism. Kevin Ezell, the leader for one agency within the convention, commented on the report, saying, "We do have an evangelism issue that we need to address," yet it is "symptomatic of an even deeper problem that we have when it comes to discipleship – to make disciples that make disciples that make disciples."

When Robby Gallaty, the chairman of the task force, gave his report, he said, "Brothers and sisters, I submit that we continue calling for evangelism, but let's not do it without a plan for biblically discipling believers. Why? Because we will see the same results that we have seen for two decades." Gallaty maintained that discipleship could serve as the cure for many of the convention's woes. He proclaimed that giving, serving, and witnessing within the church are all fruits that grow from a discipleship movement.²

What are the takeaways from the aforementioned study for the modern church? Though there are many applications, a basic commitment to biblical discipleship is of foremost importance. The word "disciple" is at the heart of the Christian religion. While Jesus was on Earth, He called twelve disciples to follow Him. Scripture referred to them as "disciples" for a reason (Matthew 5:1). The term was used in the first-century world for one who followed a rabbi. The root of the word contained a verb that meant "to learn." Thus, disciples were ones who learned from another. Interestingly, when Jesus called His closest disciples to Himself, He selected twelve (Mark 3:14).

The number was not without meaning. Just as there were twelve tribes of Israel, the Lord wanted twelve leaders for the church. In fact, the title "the Twelve" was an official designation for Jesus group of followers (Mark 6:7). The original band of disciples had such a prominent place in the building of Christ's church that the book of Revelation depicted them as being on equal plain with the twelve tribes of Israel. In the presence of God, twenty-four symbolic elders worship the Lord, giving witness to the Lord's might works through both Israel and the church (Revelation 4:4, 10). For all of eternity, the

¹ <https://christianindex.org/stories/task-force-to-address-sbc-decline-in-membership-baptisms,779>

² <https://bcmd.org/2018/06/task-force-report-baptism-must-lead-to-discipleship/>

Twelve will be memorialized in the New Heaven and New Earth, as the capital city of God's new creation will have inscriptions honoring the Twelve (Revelation 21:14).

Such realities testify to the prominence and priority of discipleship within the church. Before the Lord ascended into heaven, He told the Twelve, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:18-19). The ministry of the first disciples carries on through the New Testament church (Ephesians 2:20; 4:11-12). From Jesus' words, let's consider six key ideas related to discipleship.

Jesus sets the agenda for discipleship. When Jesus gave what is now known as His "Great Commission," He said, "All authority has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). The word rendered "authority" is one that meant the right to determine a course of action.³ One has said it referred to "Jesus' divinely given and unrestricted exercise of freedom to act."⁴ Our Lord's admission of authority is instructive for us. As we set out to make disciples, we are not looking to ourselves, or to any other person, for insight or instruction. The Lord and His Word form our basis of operation. The opinions of mankind and the shifting wind of culture do not set the agenda for how we teach and train others. Both the methodologies and materials we use are to come from the mind and mouth of Jesus. Effectiveness and faithfulness in discipleship is only realized when we regard our Lord as being the one who directs, determines, and drives all that we do in discipleship.

True discipleship will result in evangelism. In Jesus' Great Commission, He made reference to baptism. The word "baptizing" was one that meant "to dip" or "to immerse." It was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) to speak of the way in which Namaan, the king of Samaria, "dipped" himself in the Jordan River in order to receive healing of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:14). Jesus used the word to refer to the ceremony through which new believers were admitted into the church. The mode of dipping under water was important, as it provided an object lesson concerning the nature of Christian salvation. Through faith in Christ, one's old life is buried and rendered powerless. In addition, one is raised to newness of life through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Romans 6:3-4). Why does such baptism have a place in discipleship? The answer is simple – when the church commits to making disciples, people will be saved. Teaching and training people in God's Word begets baptism. A church committed to discipleship can rest assured that its baptismal waters will be stirred often.

Biblical discipleship involves teaching of God's Word. Though the act of making disciples implies one-on-one relationships, it is not just a relational activity. Our Lord said it should involve "teaching" (Matthew 28:19). The word He used meant "to instruct

³ Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), [CD-Rom].

⁴ Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Baker's Greek New Testament Library. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), [CD-Rom].

by word of mouth.”⁵ While He was on Earth, Jesus committed Himself fervently to such activity (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 11:1; 13:54; Luke 20:1). He personally embraced and emulated what He commanded in His Great Commission. His instruction and example was not lost on the early church. When the early movement of Christ-followers began to blossom, they exhibited a dogged dedication to instruction and teaching (Acts 15:35). Acts 5:42 says, “Every day in the temple, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.” The pattern of our Lord and the practice of the early church is meant to continue to this day (Col. 2:7; 1 Tim. 6:2; 2 Tim. 2:2). Colossians 3:16 says we are to be in the habit of “teaching and admonishing one another.” Nowadays some churches are negligent in this area. Church is often more about socializing. Sometimes gatherings seem more like a religious show with spiritual spectators. To be faithful to Christ’s Great Commission, priority must be placed on the simple instruction of God’s Word.

Biblical discipleship stresses obedience to God’s Word. According to Jesus, Great Commission discipleship is to be focused on teaching people “to observe everything” Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:19). Confusion concerning the word “observe” has obscured a critical element of discipleship. Modern conceptions of the word have led many to make associations of “looking at” or “watching” with discipleship. As a result, some have unwittingly embraced a method of making disciples that is devoid of a foundational function Jesus prescribed. Learners are often regarded as passive subjects who sit and watch (“observe”) another who teaches. As result, there isn’t sufficient emphasis on the assimilation and application of teaching in one’s lifestyle. A better understanding of the meaning of the word “observe” will help us in this regard. The first-century Greek term found in the New Testament is one that was often used of a Roman soldier watching over a strategic location (Acts 12:6). It described the act of one watching something or someone in order to guarantee safekeeping. Applied figuratively to the Christian life, the word depicted the act of one maintaining an appropriate focus on Jesus’ teaching in order to obey it. The term tells us that Christian discipleship should be centered on obeying God’s Word. It is not the truth we know that matters. It is the truth we obey. As a result, real discipleship should have an element of accountability and support. Disciples should encourage and exhort other discipleship to put the Word of God into practice (Galatians 6:1; James 5:16; 1 John 5:16).

Biblical discipleship draws on power from the Lord. In His closing remarks in His Great Commission, Jesus said, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). His words were a reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit. In John’s gospel, He told His disciples, “Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don’t go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7). Promise concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit had a special place in the Great Commission because of the way in which the Spirit would provide believers with strength for gospel mission and ministry. In Acts 1:8, another account of the Great Commission, Jesus made a more-specific reference to the help the

⁵ Zodhibates, [CD-Rom].

Spirit would provide in disciple-making activities. He said, “ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The Greek word rendered “power” in Acts 1:8 was the one from which we get our word “dynamite.” Sure, Paul wasn’t aware of our modern conceptions of dynamite, but the word association helps us understand that the power of Acts 1:8 was a mighty and effectual type of power. As used by Jesus, in His Great Mission, it referred to spiritual energy granted by the presence of the Holy Spirit in believers’ lives. Such energy give disciples supernatural capacities for making other disciples. Spiritual work can’t be accomplished via physical means, so spiritual power is a necessity for doing Christ’s work. Those who want to faithfully fulfill Christ’s mission must seek help from the Holy Spirit via the means of prayer and faith.

Biblical discipleship has multiplication as a focus. Many churches have an approach to ministry that focuses on making disciples by addition. Such a paradigm is rightfully concerned with believers reaching and equipping others, but it often fails to call others to engage in the same activity. The apostolic model presents a more effective way for making disciples. Believers are called to disciple others who disciple others. Paul told Timothy, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). Jesus intends for the church to operate by a pass-it-on mentality. Those who follow Christ shouldn’t regard themselves as mere receptacles for storing up God’s truth; instead, they should see themselves as channels designed to take Jesus to others.