



DISCIPLE MAKING

Johan Verster

**ACTS 29
COMPETENCIES**

Biblical Foundations

Matthew ends his gospel with Jesus' final command that would serve as the mission statement for not only the eleven, but for all subsequent disciples. He said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20). This is our mandate - to make disciples. The Great Commission reveals how disciples are made - by going and proclaiming the gospel¹ to the nations, by baptizing them into covenant fellowship with God and his people, and by teaching the baptized to obey all that Jesus commanded his followers. The Great Commission also reveals why we are able to make disciples - because the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth has sent us to do so and promises to go with us. However, in order for us to fully appreciate the significance of Matthew 28:18-20, we need to understand it in its greater redemptive-historical context.

Genesis chapter 1 recounts how the Triune God created the heavens and the earth, and made man in his image to rule as his vice-regent over the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:26-27). And so the Lord God blessed them and said: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Genesis 1:28). Here we find humanity's original mandate: Man in perfect fellowship with his Creator, sent out as his image bearer with God-given authority, to fill the earth and subdue it unto the glory of God. However, Adam and Eve rebelled against God's word (Genesis 2:16-17). Instead of subduing and ruling over "every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1:28), they were subdued and ruled by the Serpent and instead of enjoying and sharing God's blessing, their rebellion resulted in them experiencing and spreading God's curse (Genesis 3:15-24). This however would not be the end. God would still have his way and so he promised that out of the offspring of the woman would come one who would crush the Serpent's head (Genesis 3:15).

It is against this backdrop² that the Lord God called Abraham and said to him: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1-3). The promise God made to Abraham would be the means by which God's curse over creation would be replaced by his blessing. Where Adam failed to multiply, fill and subdue the earth, the Lord promised that he would multiply Abraham's offspring, give them the authority to rule⁴ and cause them

¹ Mark and Luke's 'Great Commission' passages make it explicit that Jesus' disciples were sent precisely to proclaim the gospel (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46-48).

² Paul links Genesis 3:15 and the Abrahamic covenant in Galatians 3:16.

³ The five-fold repetition of "blessing" in Genesis 12:1-3 mirrors the five-fold mention of "curse" in Genesis 3-11.

⁴ "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you" (Genesis 17:6).

to be a blessing to all the earth. Unlike Adam, Abraham obeyed the command and he 'went' (Genesis 12:4) - and the rest is (Israel's) history.

Israel, like Adam, was called as God's 'son' (Exodus 4:22-23) to enjoy covenant fellowship with him (Exodus 2:24-25). The purpose of Israel's redemption was for them to do that which Adam failed to do - namely, to obey God's word as his image bearers and thus fill and subdue the earth with the glory of God (Exodus 19:4-6; Deuteronomy 4:1-8). However, as those marred by Adam's sin, neither Israel, nor her kings were faithful to God's covenant with them. Instead of being a blessing to the nations, they blasphemed God's name among the Gentiles (Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:20) and after countless warnings by the Prophets, Israel - like Adam - was driven east out of God's presence, into Exile (Genesis 3:24).

More than ever before, God's promise of the One born of the woman was anticipated - One who would enjoy perfect fellowship with his Father (2 Samuel 7:14-15), who as his image bearer would be obedient to the mandate to subdue and fill the earth with the glory of God (Isaiah 42:1-9, 49:1-7) and ultimately receive everlasting dominion, so that all people, nations and languages would serve him (Daniel 7:14). Enter Jesus. God the Son was 'sent' (John 17:3) into this world as the Son of God - the second Adam, the offspring of Abraham, the true Son of David and the promised Son of Man. He came as God's perfect image bearer (Colossians 1:15) and enjoyed perfect fellowship with his Heavenly Father (John 10:15; 17:1-5). He was always obedient to his Father's will, thus deserving all the blessings of the Old Covenant, yet was hung on a tree as one accursed, so that the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles and the promised Spirit be received by all (Galatians 3:13-14).

It is in light of this greater story of redemption that we should understand Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18-20. Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 28:1-10) was God's vindication of his beloved Son and his subsequent ascension was his coronation as the Son of Man to whom all authority in heaven and on earth is given, so that all people, nations and languages should worship him (Daniel 7:14; Matthew 28:18). Jesus' 'going', his baptism (Mark 10:38) and his obedience has brought about restored fellowship between the Creator and a new humanity, a humanity which through obedience to his word, is being restored into his image (Colossians 3:10). This is the reason for the Great Commission: Jesus is calling his new humanity to fulfill the mandate that they were redeemed and created for - namely, to fill and subdue the earth with the glory of God as they go and proclaim the gospel, baptize the nations into covenant fellowship with the Triune God, and teach them to obey his commandments.

Theological Reflection

A redemptive-historical reading of Matthew 28:18-20 brings a number of correctives to our traditional understanding of what it means to make disciples. Firstly, it helps us see that discipleship is from first to last, gospel-centered. According to Jesus, disciple-making consists of both the making and the maturing of converts (vv.19-20)⁵, and the grounds for each aspect of this mandate is Jesus' gospel announcement in verse 18: "all authority

⁵ Matthew 28:19-20 consists of only one verb - namely to 'make disciples', while the three participles ('going', 'baptizing' and 'teaching') tells us how disciples are to be made.

in heaven and on earth has been given to me". Michael Horton says it well: "The Great Commission actually begins with a great announcement. Before there can be a mission, there has to be a message."⁶ And so, it is the gospel-message concerning Jesus as the all-authoritative son of God, son of David and Son of Man, which fuels and forms our efforts to make disciples. It propels us to go and proclaim the very same gospel to others, calling them – in baptism – to be brought into fellowship with their Creator, and through obedience to his gospel-word, be conformed into his image. As Jonathan Dodson writes: "The gospel integrates, not dichotomizes, evangelism and discipleship by announcing a grace that saves and sanctifies disciples"⁷.

Secondly, it helps us see that discipleship is holistic. The word 'disciple' simply means 'one who is a learner'. To be a disciple of Jesus is to be someone who is 'learning Jesus and his ways' (Matthew 28:20a). However, similar to how Israel came to know the LORD (Exodus 6:6-7, 16:12), 'learning Jesus' is not restricted to mastering intellectual content (Matthew 5-7; Lk 6), but happens as Jesus' teaching is observed, obeyed and experienced in everyday life (Mark 8-10; Jn 13). This then is how we are called to make disciples. Discipleship is an apprenticeship - we make disciples as we encourage others to listen to Jesus (through his Word, the Bible), and as we encourage them to live with Jesus (through his body, the church).

Thirdly, it helps us see that discipleship is transformative. The Great Commission not only calls us to teach others Jesus' commandments, but to teach them to 'obey' it (Matthew 28:20a). As was the perfect reality for man before the fall, the aim of knowing Jesus is becoming like him (2 Corinthians 3:18; Philippians 3:10). As Jesus himself said: "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained (mature) will be like his teacher." (Luke 6:40). This is an important corrective to the easy-believism of the modern church. The modern church is plagued by 'cheap grace', as Bonhoeffer said: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession"⁸. In contrast with this, biblical discipleship is, as we have noted earlier, interested in 'subduing' rebellion and creating a new humanity who is living under God's word, for the sake of reflecting his glorious image throughout creation (Genesis 1:26-27; Colossians 3:10).

Finally, it helps us see that discipleship is a corporate endeavor. Just as the original mandate in Genesis 1:28 was given to all humanity, so too the Great Commission is the mandate for all those who are part of God's new humanity. When Jesus calls for baptism, he draws the baptized not only into fellowship with God, but also into fellowship with God's people, the church (Acts 2:41; Ephesians 4:5). The church is not only the product of the Great Commission, but also the vehicle by which it will be fulfilled. We see this interplay between disciple-making and the Church most clearly in the book of Acts. As the Apostles went out to proclaim the gospel (Acts 2:14-36), those who believed were baptized and added to the believing community (vv.37-47). Yet, as the church grew and matured, the word of God rang

⁶ Michael Horton, *The Gospel Commission*, 2011, 22

⁷ Jonathan Dodson, *Gospel-Centred Discipleship*, 2012, 40

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 1959, 44

forth from them and the number of disciples multiplied (Acts 6:7). Likewise, Acts 11 reports how the scattered disciples proclaimed the gospel in Antioch, resulting in the formation of a church where the disciples were first called ‘Christians’ (Acts 11:26). However, it was this very same church that set Paul and Barnabas apart as missionaries (Acts 13:1-3), thus resulting in a wave of churches being planted across Asia Minor (Acts 13-17). The book of Acts, and in fact, the rest of the New Testament depicts discipleship as a team sport. Disciples are made as the church proclaims the gospel (1 Peter 2:9-10), and as it lives out the implications of the gospel in an authentic way (John 17:23; Philippians 2:14-16).

Cultural Engagement

The Church has wrestled since its inception with the extent to which it should relate to culture. The varying convictions have stretched from total separation, to total assimilation with the surrounding culture. However, the Great Commission mandate rejects both extremes and provides us with a balanced way of engaging with culture.

On the one hand, Jesus commands us to make disciples by *going to the nations*. The ‘sentness’ of disciple-making has of course its origin in Jesus’ own mission. As he said: ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you’ (John 20:21). John Stott, comments:

“In these words Jesus gave us not only a command to evangelize (‘the Father sent me; I send you’), but also a pattern of evangelism (‘As the Father sent me, so I send you’)...Jesus Christ was the first missionary, and all our mission is derived from His. Now we might ask, how did the Father send the Son?...The Father’s sending of the Son involved life in the world...Having assumed our nature, He shared our experience. Once ‘Word was made flesh,’ He ‘dwelt among us’ (John 1:14). He exposed Himself to temptation, sorrow, loneliness, opposition, scorn. He mixed freely with men, even in sinful, secular society...I personally believe that our failure to obey the implications of this command is the greatest weakness of evangelical Christians in the field of evangelism today. We do not identify. We believe so strongly (and rightly) in proclamation that we tend to proclaim our message from a distance. We sometimes appear like people who shout advice to drowning men from the safety of the seashore. We do not dive in to rescue them. We are afraid of getting wet, and indeed of greater perils than this. But Jesus Christ did not broadcast salvation from the sky. He visited us in great humility.”⁹

On the other hand, as we enter and engage the culture, there is still a message to proclaim. We are called to “Go into all the world and *proclaim the gospel to the whole creation*” (Mark 16:15). This demands thoughtful and faithful contextualization. Tim Keller says it well:

“The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture in a way that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without

⁹ John R. Stott, *“The Great Commission” in One Race, One Gospel, One Task, Official Reference Volumes of the World Congress on Evangelism, 1966* (Minneapolis, World Wide Publications, 1967) Vol.1 pages 39-41

removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth. A contextualized gospel is marked by clarity and attractiveness, and yet it still challenges sinners' self-sufficiency and calls them to repentance. It adapts and connects to the culture, yet at the same time challenges and confronts it."¹⁰

We see this principle very clearly embodied in the book of Acts, as the apostle Paul engaged various cultural groups:

- In Acts 13:13-52, Paul entered a synagogue in Antioch and preached the gospel to the Jews by identifying with them as a fellow Jew, and by using the Old Testament scriptures, argued that the resurrected Jesus is the promised, eternal son of David.
- However, when Paul and Barnabas were confronted with the pagan worship of the gentiles in Lystra, he rather appealed to his hearers enjoyment of crops and food, and pointed to the true and living Creator-God as the source of these blessings (Acts 14:8-20).
- Paul was so committed to contextualization that he circumcised Timothy, "because of the Jews who were in those places" (Acts 16:3).
- And when Paul visited Athens and saw the city full of idols, he went to the epicenter of their religious debate - the Areopagus - and after acknowledging their cultural and religious norms¹¹ and affirming some of the teaching of their cultural leaders¹², he made his gospel appeal (Acts 17:29-31).

Paul provides us with a model for how culture should be engaged in the pursuit of making disciples. He entered specific cultural contexts, affirmed certain aspects of their beliefs and practices, yet challenged their logical inconsistencies and moral bankruptcy, before providing gospel hope and calling his hearers to repentance and faith in Christ.

However, it is precisely at this point of gospel proclamation that the Great Commission protects us from cultural assimilation. Jesus' announcement that "*all authority in heaven and on earth*" (Matthew 28:18) belongs to him is a political one, whereby he calls the nations and its cultures to lay down their arms and pledge allegiance to his rule and kingdom (vv.19-20). All those who obediently proclaim Christ as Lord in the culture, and who call fellow disciples to live with Christ as Lord in the culture, will be hated by the culture for being 'otherworldly' (John 15:18-20; 17:13-14). All throughout the New Testament we see that Paul's commitment to make disciples was marked by persecution (2 Corinthians 11:24-29), and it is promised to be the lot of all who seek to obey the Great Commission (2 Timothy 3:12). Cultural engagement will result in cultural estrangement.

¹⁰ Tim Keller, *Center Church*, 2012, 89

¹¹ "I perceive that in every way you are very religious." (Acts 17:22)

¹² "for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.'" (Acts 17:28)

Missional Significance

The Great Commission is by definition missional. When Jesus calls his disciples to make disciples who will obey all that he has commanded, it includes the very commandment given in Matthew 28:18-20 - namely, to make disciples. What this means is that the mission will continue until Jesus returns at the end of the age. God will have his way. He will see to it that his image bearers multiply, and he will not stop until they fill and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:28; Habakkuk 2:14). If this is true, then there is no such thing as a disciple who is not sent, and there is no such thing as a church that is not sending.

This is why Acts 29 exists. This is why we plant churches that plant churches. We have been given the mandate to make disciples and we believe that the planting of new churches is not only the most effective, but also the divinely ordained vehicle for making disciples. To be sure, remaining a single-issue network that seeks to make disciples by planting churches will be costly. It will cost us our time, energy, resources, reputation and for some, even their lives. But then we remember the great announcement: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age".

Further reading and reflection questions are available at acts29.com/competencies.