

Shooting Sacred Cows

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Make Disciples is NOT the Core of the Great Commission.

Please don't hear me say that we should not make disciples. We must. In fact this has been one of our biggest failings, both at home and abroad. We have missed the part of the Great Commission that says "teaching them to obey all I have commanded you." But here's my problem.

Many books on doing church start by stating that the Great Commission provides the marching orders for the church. They refer to Matthew 28:18-20, the most common expression of The Great Commission. Open your Bibles and look at Matthew 28:18-20. What do you read? (Read it in the NIV.) Is this what you read?

¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in^[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Often authors exegete this passage by saying that "Go" is a participle, meaning 'when you go,' or 'if you go,' and the heart of the Great Commission is "make disciples." The rest of the book is about how to reach the people in your community. This understanding falls in line with our cultural preoccupation with size, quality, and success. More and more of the church income is required to run the church with its growing facilities, multiple staff, and the latest in audio visual equipment. It takes almost all of the oil it produces to run the refinery. I visited a church plant last Saturday night and it occurred to me that the most indispensable item of the whole place was a crushingly powerful sound system.

We know from grammar school that the irreducible components of a sentence are the subject and verb. What is the subject in this verse? The subject is an understood 'You.' And the main verb is "make." In the case of a transitive verb, one that transfers the action to an object, you must also have the object. You can't say, "Go call...," without saying "Go call your father," or "Go call the dog." It is incomplete without the object.

So here we have the complete core, "You, make disciples." So what's the problem?

The problem is that the word "make" is not in the text. The grammar is better represented in the King James that says, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations...." The subject is still 'you.' But the main verb, a transitive verb, is "teach." The word "teach" would be better translated "disciple." But the NIV translators weren't comfortable using the noun "disciple" as a verb. So they wrote it as "make disciples."

"Teach" and "disciple" are transitive verbs. The sentence isn't complete until you have the object. And the object is "all nations." Thus the core of the Great Commission is not "make disciples" but "disciple all nations." There is a great deal of difference between "making disciples" and "discipling all nations."

The outworking of this in practice is that church leaders focus on 'making disciples,' but neglect 'all nations.' When 'all nations' is a prepositional phrase, it can easily slip out of our awareness. So

churches are busy attracting and converting and teaching people in their churches with relatively little focus on people beyond our community. And they think they are fulfilling The Great Commission.

To show how pervasive is this misunderstanding, I was preparing for a presentation to which I had given the title, "The Great Commission-Driven Church." A pastor called me and said, "I have taken training and been doing some teaching on "The Great Commission Church" and I would like to ask you to expand this subject and spend some time talking about global missions."

When a pastor looks at a workshop on the Great Commission and assumes it's going to be locally focused, then it seems that modern writers and church experts have domesticated the Great Commission! And as churches we have fallen right in line.

Let's try to illustrate what this means by means of a story. Let's suppose that my wife is going away for a week to care for her dad. Before she goes, she asks me in a very kind tone, "Honey, you know your folks are coming soon after I get back and since I'm leaving in a hurry, I haven't had time to clean up the house. There is one thing I would like you to go while I'm gone. I'd like you to clean the whole house." And knowing I'm often not listening, she continues, "I'd like you to go through the whole house and clean all the rooms." Again, just before she leaves, she sticks her head in my office, gives me a kiss, and says, "Good-by honey. Remember, please go into all the rooms and clean them." "OK," I say as she gets in the car, and I continue working.

As the week goes on, I'm busy. I'm working in my office and occasionally I remember my wife's words, "Go into all the house and clean every room." And I think to myself, "She really wants me to clean up around here." I look around at my messy office and think, "I'd better get busy cleaning." And I start shuffling some papers around and throwing out some accumulated piles of stuff.

In my more introspective moments I think to myself, "she's asking me to clean up." "I've got to clean up." And I throw a little more effort into organizing my office.

I only go in the kitchen to get a bite to eat. I throw the dishes in the sink for later. I only go in the living room to watch the news and read a few magazines. I don't even go in the guest bedroom. While she's gone I'm terribly busy in the office.

I spend a fair amount of effort cleaning up the office and things look a bit better when one day my wife breezes in the door with a cheery, "Hi, honey, I'm home!" But the smile quickly fades as she looks around the living room with scattered magazines and a half-inch of dust. She walks into the kitchen where the wastebasket is overflowing and the sink is full of dirty dishes. "What happened?" she moans. "What happened to cleaning the whole house?"

You see, there is a big difference between "cleaning up" and "cleaning the whole house."
And there is a big difference between "making disciples" and "discipling the nations."

Reaching the world is not a program of the church, it is the purpose of the church. And every building, every ministry, and every member are meant to be contributing to that purpose.

Poverty, pain, and injustice are NOT God's primary concern.

Now please don't jump to the conclusion that God is not concerned about poverty, pain and injustice.

He is. What I am saying is that it is not his primary concern.

In my email prayer notes Sunday night, I included this question: "Are the things on God's mind increasingly becoming front burner items on my mind?"

One of our friends wrote back: Yes, the things God thinks about are becoming our foremost thoughts: ...hunger, poverty, the downtrodden...

I think that perhaps the primary thing on God's mind is the glory of his name in all the earth, the billions of people he created who have no fellowship with him, and perhaps the great dark areas of the earth where people do not know Jesus or even anything about him.

Books on church and missions are being written that seem to interpret God's primary concern is improving our physical situation. For example, the book *When Helping Hurts* (which I highly recommend), says that God was displeased with Israel because of Israel's failure to care for the poor and oppressed (Isa. 58:1-3, 5-10). This is a very partial explanation. All the books about the kings and prophets repeatedly warn Israel that their primary sin is the worship of false gods, breaking the first and second commandments. Failing to care for the poor and oppressed was part of their lack of obedience.

A few years ago I read a book that said Jesus' purpose statement is stated in Luke 4:18-19. (NIV)

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."^[a]

This has become a theme of a variety of writers, including the book I just mentioned. The reasoning says that if this is Jesus' purpose, then it should be our purpose.

There is some question about exactly what Jesus meant when he said he was anointed to "preach" good news and "proclaim" freedom. But this is not all Jesus said about his purpose. During the last several months, I have been combing the gospels to see what Jesus did, what he said his purpose was, and what he specifically told his disciples to do.

The overwhelming conclusion is that Jesus said his purpose is to bring life, abundant life, spiritual life, eternal life, the Christ life. And after the resurrections he met with the disciples at least five times over six weeks to give them their marching orders. And these are given to us in The Great Commission statements. He sent them as He was sent, to preach the Gospel to every creature, to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins, to evangelize and disciple the nations, and to do it with his authority and power.

Helping the poor, the sick, and the oppressed is part of what we are to do as Christians, but it is not the primary part of it. Humanitarian ministries are not to be ignored or neglected. Jesus had compassion on people. He healed the sick and cast out demons. When he told the story of the Good Samaritan, he told the lawyer to go and do likewise. Jesus is concerned about our circumstances, but he is more concerned about our obedience.

Someone had a cartoon in which one person said, "I don't understand why God allows poverty, pain and oppression when he could just do something about it?" And the other person said, "I'm afraid God will ask me the same question!"

Luis Palau in an ACMC Conference years ago told us that in the area of the world where he grew up, many Christians came and did humanitarian work. It all gradually faded away. Only where Christians

came and planted churches did the people in those churches continue to do humanitarian work.

I conclude that there are two themes, a major theme and a minor theme. The major theme deals with real life, spiritual life, eternal life – knowing God, having a relationship with him, living eternally with him, obeying him. The minor theme deals with people's physical situation in this world.

If we care about people we will care about injustice and pain and poverty. And we will do something about it. At the same time, our life in this world is temporary, no matter how good it is or how good we can make it for others. Our circumstances are temporary but our relationships are eternal. Life is forever.

And here's the point: If we help people physically but fail to help them come to know Christ, we lose it all. It may be that in our day, demonstrating the Gospel by helping people in physical and social circumstances will be the primary means of introducing them to Jesus.

Why am I concerned about this? Here's why: I see three cultural streams converging in our time. The first stream is a great wave of compassion in our culture. Everywhere I go, I see young people who want to go into the darkness and depravity and make a difference for people. Strong Christians, weak Christians and non-Christians. I applaud that. It's a wonderful thing.

At Taylor University I visited the missions class. Nearly every student wanted to work in the inner city, in poverty relief, in helping overcome AIDS in Africa, etc.

Last week at a major church in Ohio, the outreach pastor explained that to get people interested in missions today, they appeal to the causes: Africa/AIDS/Bono, or sex trafficking, etc. This is what concerns people today. These things are in the news and on their minds. They are promoted by celebrities. Wonderful. Provided that we do not lose sight of the overwhelming issue of their spiritual condition!

Here's the second stream. I keep hearing from every direction that we have a generation of young people who are poorly educated in the fundamentals of their faith. Many are quite vague on the basic truths of Christianity, what they believe, what it means, and how to articulate it. They love Jesus, but for some it may be a warm fuzzy feeling more than a deep set conviction. Further many are not strong on thinking and logic. We are becoming a nation of quick responders, not deep thinkers.

I hear people talk about the great need for humanitarian ministries and their deep concern for people. And then they say, almost as aside, "and perhaps some will become Christians." And it sounds weak, almost as if they were saying, perhaps they will become republicans.

Here is the third stream. We have become encultured with an understanding of tolerance that says all viewpoints are equally legitimate and it is unkind, indeed almost 'hate speech' to claim that you have truth and other people are wrong. It has become very rare for Christians in American to share their faith.

Robert Wuthnow, author of *Boundless Faith - The Global Outreach of American Churches*

"The social pressures to emphasize service rather than evangelism...are quite powerful. Given the prevailing ethos of tolerance in the United States, it seems quite wrong to confront a devout Muslim or Hindu about his or her need to believe in Jesus, whereas no questions would be raised about giving a starving Muslim or Hindu a meal. Not surprisingly, *a popular solution to this dilemma is to*

redefine service as evangelism" (242)(italics mine) "Humanitarianism does not so much replace evangelism as evangelism becomes redefined as showing Christian love through humanitarian work." (135)

So what happens when a generation of people who are weak in their faith go to help people who are hurting. Will they be able to help them spiritually and give them eternal hope? Will their Christian lives be robust and real enough to be attractive? Will they be able to articulate for people how to truly know Christ?

My big concern: Will we win a few short-term battles against pain and poverty and lose the war for eternal life? Where are we headed? In the last generation we have stressed conversion with an inadequate emphasis on obedience. We dare not make the opposite mistake, emphasizing service and neglecting evangelism.

I suggest that the avenue of helping hurting people can be excellent ministry and the best route to helping people find spiritual life. I'm all for it. But we must be sure that the people we send live a life that is spiritually empowered and that they can effectively introduce people to Jesus.

Every Christian is NOT a missionary and not all ministry is missions.

A few years ago, I visited a pastor who asked me, "How do mission organizations prepare people to be missionaries?" I began to think about learning about a new country, preparing to cross-cultures, taking additional Bible study, and so forth. It wasn't clear to me why he was asking. He said, "I want to prepare *all* my people to be missionaries."

It took me a minute to understand that he wasn't asking about crossing cultures, but about developing disciples. He saw missionaries as people who were sold out for Christ's purposes, living the Christ life, serving others, and actively witnessing. He wanted his people to live like that where they are. In his mind, a missionary was what I would call a disciple.

You have been in services where the pastor says something like,

- We are all missionaries.
- You are the missionary to your world.
- You are either a missionary or a mission field.
- When you leave the sanctuary today, be sure to read the plaque over the back door that says, "You are entering your mission field."

These are all very noble sentiments. We certainly do want people to be obedient disciples, live the Christ life, serve others, and reach out for Jesus where they live and work. The only question is whether it is helpful to call these people "missionaries." You might think that "Christian" or "disciple" would be a suitable term. Why does this bother me? And why do I consider it a big deal?

Traditionally missionaries are people who have been sent on a mission, who have left the familiar things behind to study and prepare for specialized service in another country and another culture. Such cross-cultural ministry is often difficult and demanding. It typically requires a great deal of preparation, self-sacrifice, an unusual dependence upon God, and considerable experience to be fruitful. Such a vocation deserves a term to set it apart.

When someone becomes a nurse or a doctor, for instance, we assume that they have taken years of medical schooling and done an internship that qualifies them to be a nurse or doctor. We respect the dedication and training and capability of such a person. A person who spends a week tending a sick aunt or a person who does a summer internship in a hospital does not, thereby, become a nurse or a doctor. Similarly, a person who spends two weeks in another country does not thereby, become a missionary.

I have noticed that church missions budget suffer from scope creep. A wider and wider variety of ministries are submitted for support from the church missions budget. A missions pastor friend of mine once referred to the mission budget as the miscellaneous budget because, he said, everything that no one else wants to fund is sent to the missions department. And if you say, "No, that's not missions," it is terribly offensive. What people heard you say is, "That's not important." People get defensive and aggressive.

Church leaders say, "It's all missions: our outreach to our neighbors, our involvement in the community, and the world. It's so much easier to cast a vision when we lump it all together. What's the problem?"

Well, suppose I said to the pastor, "Look everything I have comes from the Lord. It all belongs to him. All of my life is a life of stewardship. Why should I set aside a particular amount to give to the church. I will lump that in with my general spending. After all, all of my life is lived for Jesus."

We all know what happens. We have to set aside time and funding on a systematic basis for the things we ought to do but we don't do naturally. It is very easy to neglect needs far away in order to focus on the pressing needs nearby. And if we don't set boundaries on what we call missions, the natural pressures will drive us closer to home and we will neglect the wider world. I'm seeing this happen in one church after another, stretching the missions budget to meet more and more needs at home.

Now some justify this by saying that America is one of the biggest mission fields in the world. The qualifier, of course, is that about 1/3 of Americans are associated with an evangelical movement, making the U.S. the far largest producers of "national missionaries."

To repeat, the problem is that the more people we call missionaries, the more things we call missions, and the broader the missions budget, the less progress we make toward the most strategic priorities of reaching the rest of the world with the gospel. Our churches actually become the bottleneck for finishing the task of discipling the nations.

The solution: Let's train and deploy our own church members, in so far as possible, to reach out locally and to minister in our communities. And let's equip and send missionaries to assist the people in places in the world where cross-cultural outreach is required.

Conclusion: God has a vision for His Church.

⁹After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

KEEP THE GOAL IN VIEW!



