

Apprenticed to Christ: Reshaping Disciple-Making around Christ's Commission

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ABSTRACT

Discipleship is widely recognised as a pressing need in evangelical churches, but models of disciple-making are many and varied, revealing little agreement about what discipleship is and how disciples are made. If our aim is biblical faithfulness, we must develop a clear biblical understanding of these subjects. Disciples are apprentices learning from the master's words and example, and Christians are called to be apprentices of Christ. The so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 expands Jesus' mission within Israel to all nations and bridges between Jesus' call to discipleship by following him prior to his death and the mission of the Church after his departure. It describes two activities within disciple-making: baptism in the triune name into the community of disciples and teaching, through words and example, of obedience to Jesus' commands. Underpinning these activities are two assurances: Jesus' universal authority and his constant presence. When evaluated against these principles, two major deficiencies are identified in contemporary disciple-making models: a focus on one-to-one relationships, which, in the New Testament, are more typical of leadership development, and curricula that may emphasise accumulation of knowledge over transformed lives. In the Great Commission, Jesus calls his people to a mission of disciple-making that transcends all barriers and extends throughout time until the end of the age.

KEY WORDS: Discipleship; Disciples; Disciple-making; Great Commission; Mission

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades there has been an increased interest in discipleship across evangelical churches. The main driver for this development has been a recognition that many people who profess faith do not seem to progress to maturity in the faith, accompanied by a sense that traditional church activities do not actively promote such growth. This is a reaction against a sense that evangelicals have too often aimed to “‘evoke decisions’, whereas Jesus’

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command was to make disciples.”² Discipleship, it seemed, was a “lost art.”³ Books on discipleship have proliferated since the 1980s, often proposing models for disciple-making programmes or techniques. There is, however, considerable variation in these books about what discipleship is and how disciples are made. As people committed to the authority of Scripture, it is imperative that evangelicals return to the New Testament for an understanding of what it means to make disciples. This article presents the so-called ‘Great Commission’ of Matthew 28 as a key text in this process and evaluates some contemporary models of disciple-making against its emphases.

DISCIPLES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Greek word commonly translated ‘disciple’ in the New Testament is *mathētēs* (plural, *mathētai*). In the first century world it referred to a ‘learner’ or ‘apprentice’.⁴ The term apprentice may seem old-fashioned to twentieth century readers, but it may be the best way to conceive of discipleship, since it indicates a person who attaches himself to an older, more experienced master with the intention of learning the skills of the trade by close observation and verbal instruction. Apprenticeship, thus, encompasses four ideas which are vital to understanding discipleship: a goal of which the master is the epitome; intentional commitment to learn from the master; words and example as dual means of teaching; and close relationship as the context of learning. Thus, “a disciple is both a learner and a follower”,⁵ who observes a master in order to learn how to think, act and speak like him. In the Gospels, *mathētēs* is used of the followers of Jesus as well as those who were apprenticed to other teachers such as John the Baptist and the Pharisees.⁶ The practice of people apprenticing themselves to learned rabbis, who had themselves been disciples of earlier rabbis, was well established in the time of Jesus and remained a central feature of education in rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.⁷ In the time of Jesus, there appears to have been no formal requirement for ordination of a rabbi, with teachers appointing their own successors much as Jesus did.⁸

² Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 322.

³ As suggested in the title of LeRoy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

⁴ Frederick Danker (ed.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 609.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: IVP, 1992), 746.

⁶ Mark 2:18.

⁷ See Jacob Neusner, *The Four Stages of Rabbinic Judaism* (London: Routledge, 1999), viii.

⁸ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, third edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 573.

The term disciples appears frequently in all four Gospels and in Acts. Jesus called people to be his disciples by taking up their cross to follow him.⁹ From among a wider group of disciples, he chose the Twelve to learn from him in a more focused way by leaving their professions and homes to live alongside him on his travels as well as hearing his instruction.¹⁰ In Acts, ‘disciples’ is a common term for believers in Christ. By contrast, the word is not found at all in the epistles or Revelation. This total absence cannot be explained by authorial preferences. The fact that none of those who wrote epistles – James, John, Jude, Paul and Peter – used the word must surely indicate that it was not the dominant form of address among Christians. Luke’s use of *mathētēs* in Acts may reflect his emphasis on the continuity of the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus through the Spirit and apostles with his ministry before the cross as recounted in Luke’s Gospel, rather than widespread usage within the early churches. Indeed, the word only appears in dialogue once in Acts, on the lips of Peter speaking at the Jerusalem Council.¹¹ The epistles indicate that the predominant way in which Christians referred to one another was as “brothers and sisters” (Greek *adelphoi*). Even in Acts, *adelphoi* appears more often than *mathētai* (33 times and 25 times respectively). Other terms for those who believed in Jesus appearing in Acts include: believers (five times);¹² ‘saints’ (four times);¹³ ‘Christian’ (twice, most likely as a derisory term);¹⁴ ‘follower of the way (once);¹⁵ and ‘Nazarene’ (once, also as a derisory term).¹⁶ Unlike ‘disciples’, most of these terms (the exception being ‘Nazarenes’), continue into the epistles, in similar proportions, with *adelphoi* remaining predominant.

It would, however, be premature to conclude from the disappearance of the term ‘disciple’ that discipleship, which was such an important concept for Jesus, does not continue in the Church. The core concepts in discipleship – Jesus as the definition of maturity, the need for commitment to him, the importance of words and example, and close relationship as the context – continue throughout the epistles. The shift to *adelphoi* from *mathētai* as the main collective terms for believers does not indicate an abandonment of these principles but their integration with a fifth – the Church as the household and family of God within which believers learn and mature. *Mathētēs* may also have been a less appropriate term in contexts outside the Church’s origins in Judea and Galilee

⁹ Matthew 16:24.

¹⁰ Mark 3:14 says that Jesus appointed the twelve “so that they might be with him” and Mark 10:28 indicates that they had “left everything” to follow him.

¹¹ Acts 15:10.

¹² Acts 5:14; 10:45; 15:5; 16:1; 19:18.

¹³ Acts 9:13, 32, 41; 26:10.

¹⁴ Acts 11:26; 26:28.

¹⁵ Acts 24:14, NIV.

¹⁶ Acts 24:5.

where different concepts of education were prevalent.¹⁷ As the Church began to experience persecution and faced potential divisions, it may also have become increasingly important to emphasise the ‘horizontal’ relationships indicated by *mathētai*.

The nature of the ‘vertical’ relationship of believers with God was also different from the experience of the disciples in the Gospels, who followed Jesus around, eating and sleeping with him. Those who believed in Jesus through the message these first disciples preached were still followers of Jesus, but after his ascension and the coming of the Spirit, following him no longer meant walking around after the incarnate Son, but following the leading of the indwelling Spirit sent to be a Helper like him.¹⁸ The metaphor of walking to describe the Christian life is important in the epistles – we are to walk in love and obedience to the truth, in a manner worthy of God and like Christ – but it is not walking after the physical embodiment of God in Christ but after the leading of God the Spirit.¹⁹

In summary, the word *mathētai*, which predominates in the Gospels, gives way in the epistles to *adelphoi* (“brothers” or “brothers and sisters”), but the concepts inherent in discipleship continue in terms of life in the Spirit and in community.

THE GREAT COMMISSION AS A KEY TEXT

Having established that discipleship continues to be important, we must now consider how disciples are made. Our central text for these purposes is Matthew 28:18-20, generally known as the ‘Great Commission’. Since at least the nineteenth century,²⁰ this is undisputedly the most influential passage in the history of Protestant missions.²¹ Given its significance, the passage deserves to be quoted in full.

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them

¹⁷ A similar argument may be made for the paucity of references to the ‘kingdom of God’ in the epistles, where it gives way to language of Jesus’ Lordship.

¹⁸ John 14:15.

¹⁹ Romans 6:4; 8:4; 13:13; 14:15; 2 Corinthians 5:7; 10:2; Galatians 5:16,25; 6:16; Ephesians 2:10; 4:1; 5:2,8,15; Philippians 3:17; Colossians 1:10; 2:6; 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:12; 4:1,12; 1 John 1:7; 2:6; 2 John 1:4.6; 3 John 1:3,4

²⁰ For a history of the use of the phrase ‘Great Commission’ see David Wright, “The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary”, *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (2007): 153ff.

²¹ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 340-341.

to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Biblical scholars have proposed various literary forms for this passage based on Old Testament and other ancient Near Eastern precedents, but there does not appear to be any direct parallel.²² What is clear is that the passage contains three sentences: a central command sentence surrounded by two assurances.

Some missiologists have argued that an excessive focus on the Great Commission has unhelpfully limited the scope of mission. Some appeal to post-resurrection commissioning passages in the other Gospels and Acts for additional elements in mission, while others argue for a wider canonical basis for mission. These arguments cannot be rehearsed here but considering the text I maintain that it is not, however, exegetically irresponsible to see this passage as central to our understanding of the mission of the Church. Several features in the text indicate its importance: its positioning at the end of the Gospel; the framing of the commands between statements of Jesus’ authority and his presence; the repeated reference to universality (*all* authority, *all* nations and *all* I have commanded); and the allusions to major Old Testament themes, including God’s promises to Abraham and Daniel’s visions, that are fulfilled in it. We will see as we examine the Great Commission that the emphases of other commissioning passages are also implicit in it: witness in the Spirit’s power to the person of Jesus (Luke-Acts); Jesus sending the disciples in the same way that the Father sent him (John); and declaration of the forgiveness of sins (Luke and John).²³

In summary, we can agree with David Wright’s assertion that this “is the single most important statement of commissioning of the Christian church, from the risen Christ” and that “the New Testament contains no other passage of comparable significance” for the priorities of the Church.²⁴ In the next three sections of this article we will explore the meaning of the Commission.

THE SCOPE OF THE COMMISSION: “GO ... ALL NATIONS”

The command sentence in Matthew 19-20a contain four verbs, but only one, *mathéteuó* (translated “make disciples”) is an imperative. The other three verbs – “go”, “baptising” and “teaching” – are participles of this central command and

²² For a review of the options see Peter O’Brien, “The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?”, *Reformed Theological Review* 35, no. 3 (1976): 66-78.

²³ Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:8; John 20:21-23. I have not referred to the commissioning text from the long ending of Mark (16:15ff.) here since, although influential in the past, it is no longer widely regarded as original.

²⁴ Wright, “The Great Commission”, 135.

auxiliary to it.²⁵ The verb “go” is what makes these verses a commission. Similar “Go and” grammatical constructions elsewhere in Matthew indicate that the going is necessary for them to do what he commands.²⁶ “Go” must at least mean that the disciples are not to stay with Jesus on the mountain. nor are they to leave the earth with him. Rather, they are to return into human society and multiply their number. Furthermore, the reference to “all nations” indicates a global scope, just as the phrase “ends of the earth” does in the Acts commission.²⁷ Some scholars, suspicious of the idea that Jesus may have commanded mission beyond Israel, have suggested that “all nations” (Greek *panta ta ethne*) refers to the Jews of the diaspora.²⁸ The three earlier instances of the phrase in Matthew, however, indicate that it means people from every people group – both Jews and Gentiles.²⁹ This reading is further supported by the facts that the relevance of Jesus to all people runs as a theme throughout Matthew.

It is clear, then, that this commission is the flowering of the theme of Jesus’ relevance to all nations that runs through Matthew as he extends the reach of his teaching beyond the “lost sheep of Israel”³⁰ on whom he focused prior to his death.³¹ Indeed, that theme originated long before Jesus’ time with God’s promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him.³² The Septuagint uses *panta ta ethne* in those passages and Matthew’s use of the same phrase here indicates that it is through the testimony of the disciples to Jesus, the seed of Abraham, that all nations will be blessed. The Great Commission is, thus, the pinnacle of God’s unfolding plan of salvation.

An additional comment is in order concerning the tendency for advocates of modern mission strategies aiming to evangelise “unreached people groups” to translate *panta ta ethne* as “all ethnic groups.” Martin Goldsmith writes that “[w]hile it cannot be denied that God has used such movements to stimulate many in the church to a renewed vision for primary evangelism and church planting, the biblical foundation for such movements is unacceptable.”³³ The

²⁵ O’Brien, “The Great Commission”, 72.

²⁶ Matthew 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7.

²⁷ Acts 1:8

²⁸ This view is associated with D.W.B. Robinson by O’Brien, “The Great Commission”, 73.

²⁹ See O’Brien, “The Great Commission”, 74. The other instances of *panta ta ethne* in Matthew are found in 24:9 (all nations will hate the disciples), 24:14 (the gospel will be preached to all nations) and 25:32 (all nations will be brought before the Son of Man for judgement). Each of these certainly points to Gentile people rather than Jews and can most naturally be taken to indicate that both Jews and Gentiles alike are included.

³⁰ Matthew 15:24.

³¹ Morris, *Matthew*, 746.

³² Genesis 18:18; 22:18.

³³ Martin Goldsmith, *Matthew and Mission: The Gospel Through Jewish Eyes* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 200-201.

primary significance of the term, as we have seen, is to indicate that the Jesus movement will spread beyond Israel to the Gentiles. It would be reductionist, though, to say that *panta ta ethne* simply means the Gentiles. The phrase must surely imply that each *ethnos* among the *ethne* will be reached. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus had said that “this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations [*pasin ethnesin*]; and then shall the end come.”³⁴ *Pasin* means *each* of the nations and it seems reasonable to carry that sense over into the Great Commission.

It seems, then, that there is some merit in saying that the Church has a responsibility to make disciples among each *ethnos*. The term does not refer to a geopolitical nation in the modern sense of the word, but to a recognisable group of people, closer to what we would today call an ethnic group. The difficulty for the unreached people group theorists is that we have no list of the *ethne* which existed at Jesus time, or of which of them have been reached at some point since he issued the Great Commission, or how they map onto ethnic groups identifiable today. Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra argue that *ethnos* is “the most capacious term to define a group of people linked by a common history, culture or community allegiance.”³⁵ It is unlikely, then, that Jesus could have meant the many thousands of “people groups” that modern mission strategists identify and it is anachronistic to equate, as the Joshua Project does,³⁶ an *ethnos* in Matthew 28:19 with a contemporary “people group” defined as “The largest group through which the gospel can flow without encountering significant barriers of acceptance or understanding.”³⁷ Such concepts may help mission organisations to identify priorities and formulate priorities, but they should be read back into the Great Commission. To do so, especially if combined with undue emphasis on “Go”, may wrongly imply that those who do not prioritise unreached groups are disobedient to the Commission. The command to make disciples is to every believer whether they cross cultures or not.

In summary, the Great Commission provides a firm basis for global mission to all people, but the nations should not be equated with contemporary people groups, and the Commission is just as relevant to ministry within one’s own ethnic group.

³⁴ Matthew 24:14.

³⁵ Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Nottingham: IVP, 2003), 183.

³⁶ “People Groups”, Joshua Project, accessed February 11, 2021, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups.

³⁷ Lausanne Movement, *Hidden and Forgotten People Including Those Who are Disabled* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 35A).

BAPTISM: INITIATION OF DISCIPLESHIP

As mentioned above, the imperative in the command section of the Great Commission is “make disciples”, which translates *mathéteuó*, the verbal form of *mathētēs*. The term could alternatively be translated ‘to disciple’, although this use of ‘disciple as a verb is not universally recognised.³⁸ *Mathéteuó* appears twice before this in Matthew and only one other time in the New Testament (see below). In Matthew 13:52, Jesus uses it of scribes who have “*trained for the kingdom of heaven*”, most likely meaning members of the group of Jewish religious leaders who have become his disciples.³⁹ Matthew 27:57, meanwhile, says that Joseph of Arimathea “*also was a disciple of [Lit. ‘had been disciplined to] Jesus.*” These instances add little to our understanding of discipleship other than reminding us that people are disciplined to Jesus and into the kingdom. The means of disciple making are revealed in the other two verbs that follow *mathéteuó* as participles of it: ‘baptising’ and ‘teaching’.

The command to baptise indicates that conversion is essential for discipleship. The only occurrence of *mathéteuó* outside Matthew’s Gospel affirms this principle, linking the making of disciples in Derbe with the preaching of the gospel by Paul and Barnabas.⁴⁰ The emphasis on preaching and forgiveness of sins in the commission passages in Luke and John is, therefore, implicit in Matthew’s Great Commission. In recent years, the idea of ‘pre-conversion discipleship’ has gained currency.⁴¹ It is often a corrective to evangelistic approaches that insist that crisis conversions as normative and neglect the reality that many people come to faith in Jesus gradually rather than in dramatic experience. Its advocates argue that people should be included within the community of the Church before they are believers, since in that context they may hear gospel truth and experience God’s love through his people. Belonging, and even behaving, can precede believing. The aim is still conversion, but there is a less clear line between unbelief and belief than evangelicals have traditionally expected. There is, it is argued, a precedent for this approach in the

³⁸ ‘Disciple’ is not listed as a verb in many popular-level modern English dictionaries, such as those from Oxford and Cambridge, whilst those that do include the verb, such as Collins and Dictionary.com, describe it as ‘archaic’. In this author’s experience, the verb is making a resurgence among evangelicals.

³⁹ An alternative understanding, that the reference is to a subgroup of Jesus’ disciples who were given a special function as teachers is proposed by Hans Kvalbein, “Go Therefore and Make Disciples: The Concept of Discipleship in the New Testament”, *Themelios* 13, no.2 (1988): 48-52.

⁴⁰ Acts 14:21.

⁴¹ See, for example, Alan Hirsch, *Disciplism: Reimagining Evangelism Through the Lens of Discipleship* (Exponential, 2014), 25, 28.

example of the disciples who grew gradually to believe in Jesus as they were disciplined by him.

It is undoubtedly true that people may learn about Jesus before conversion and some change of lifestyle may result, but is the idea of pre-conversion discipleship consistent with the Great Commission? Matthew 28:19 presents baptism as a starting point in disciple-making. This is not an innovation after the resurrection. We know from John's gospel that Jesus and the disciples were "making [*poiei*] and baptising [...] disciples [*mathētas*]" from an early point in Jesus' ministry.⁴² The verb *mathēteuó* is not used, but the parallel with the Great Commission is clear. The Great Commission is a continuation of this practice of initiating new disciples through water baptism. This may appear to support the idea of pre-conversion discipleship, since even the Twelve who baptised others had not yet grasped who Jesus was and could not yet be trusting in his death, which was future. There is, however, a flaw in this logic. We cannot reconstruct from a passing reference in John 4 what was understood in the baptisms Jesus' disciples performed, but we do have a clear understanding from Acts and the epistles of what baptism meant after the Great Commission and its central emphasis on identification with Jesus in his death and resurrection, which could only develop after those events, clearly indicates conversion.⁴³ It was after believing that people were baptised in Acts 2 and belonging to the Church community was subsequent to that.⁴⁴ The order was believing, then belonging and behaving. We cannot read the pre-cross pattern of disciple-making forward into Matthew 28 or make it our basis for ministry today.⁴⁵

Disciple-making after Pentecost differs from the process through which Jesus made disciples during his earthly ministry because the significance of baptism is more fully developed and conversion in the fully Christian sense is possible because of the Spirit's coming. The Twelve and others came to a gradual understanding of Jesus' identity and mission. That was inevitable since they were the first witnesses of his life and teaching and they lacked the indwelling Spirit. There is no such pattern in Acts, which describes Christian initiation in terms of the triad of faith, water baptism and reception of the Spirit. Disciples are converted people who are apprenticed to Christ. As with the instance of *mathēteuó* in Acts, the priority given to baptism in the Great Commission ties disciple-making closely to gospel proclamation which is, of course, central to the commissioning passage in Luke 24. Evangelism is implicit in the Great

⁴² John 4:1.

⁴³ Romans 6:4; Colossians 2:12-14.

⁴⁴ Acts 2:37-41.

⁴⁵ This discussion assumes believers' baptism, which is the author's conviction. A justification of that position and is not possible within an article of this length. Paedobaptist evangelicals may well place belonging in the covenant community before believing.

Commission, but discipleship starts with a response of faith to the gospel expressed in baptism. People are not disciples until they have declared their loyalty to Jesus as Lord. Jesus' radical call to discipleship – denial of self to follow him – continues after the resurrection but is met with the regenerating work of the Spirit who empowers the believer for growth in godliness.

The link between baptism and inclusion in the Church, which is explicit in Acts, is also implicit in the Great Commission. The triune formula – three persons, but only one name – is remarkable, but it is well attested as original both from the manuscript evidence and from early Christian quotations.⁴⁶ It is a declaration of commitment and of a new identity, a marker of “entrance into an allegiance” to,⁴⁷ or “passing into the possession of”, the triune God so that the “baptized person is under new management.”⁴⁸ It also indicates inclusion within the eternally-existent community within the godhead and, by extension, oneness with all who are, likewise, baptised. Whilst the Great Commission does use the word *ekklēsia* (“Church”), it concludes the only Gospel that includes explicit references to the Church. Indeed, the wording of these verses draws together all of the Gospel's major themes, including the ecclesiological.⁴⁹ The link becomes clear with Jesus' promise of his presence in verse 20, which echoes his earlier promise to be present among his followers as they gather in his name, a statement that defines the *ekklēsia* he mentions in the same passage.⁵⁰ That reference is, of course, speaking of the process which may lead to the exclusion of an unrepentant person from the community of disciples. People may well feel welcome in gatherings of the church community before conversion – that is surely to be hoped for – but no one can truly belong in the Church without believing and a person who will not repent of sin and so is not progressing as a disciple cannot continue to be counted among the church community, which is the primary context for disciple-making. Discipline is inseparable from discipleship.

TEACHING: CONTINUATION OF DISCIPLE-MAKING

Baptism is a single experience that initiates discipleship, but teaching, the second activity within disciple-making, is lifelong and regular. Baptised believers *are* disciples, but they continue to be *discipled* as they are taught. Specifically, the Great Commission teaches that disciples grow by learning to obey the things that

⁴⁶ Green, *The Message of Matthew*, 322-323.

⁴⁷ Richard France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Volume 1, reprinted format (Nottingham: IVP; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2008), 420.

⁴⁸ Peskett and Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission*, 176.

⁴⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 57; Terence Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 170.

⁵⁰ Matthew 18:17, 20.

Jesus taught, so disciple-makers must teach them all that Matthew and the other Gospels record of Jesus' teaching about life in the kingdom of God. At the centre of this teaching is the Great Commandment to love God with our whole being and others as we love ourselves.⁵¹ As such, in the words of G. Campbell Morgan, this is "a great and gracious and spacious commission" that insists on "the ethic of the Kingdom."⁵² As John Stott wrote, "The Great Commission neither explains, nor exhausts, nor supersedes the Great Commandment."⁵³ Rather, it is through the Great Commission that the Great Commandment is fulfilled – love for God motivates us to obey it and love for others motivates us to bring them into discipleship – and expanded – those who become disciples will obey the commandment.

This link between Great Commission and Great Commandment reminds us that, while the Church's mission is disciple-making and formation of church communities in which it proceeds, that mission's outworking will be holistic, responding to material needs and issues that harm the people Jesus commands us to love.⁵⁴ Keith Ferdinando helpfully describes disciple-making as the "innermost of [...] four concentric circles" that have been said to define mission.⁵⁵ He accepts that the other circles may be aspects of mission, but argues that disciple-making is the "*sine qua non* of authentically Christian mission." Other aspects of mission, such as engagement with the world and social action for the good of others, are fulfilled as disciples are made, but if those other aspects displace disciple-making as the essence of mission, there will be no disciples to further them.

Since the Great Commission calls us to teach obedience to what Jesus commanded, we might conclude that teaching from the Gospels should be central in Christian development. It would, however, be wrong to drive a wedge between the Gospels and the epistles. The things Jesus taught the disciples include the truths they could not receive during his earthly ministry, into which the Spirit he promised led them after his departure.⁵⁶ Disciple-making should, then, include teaching from all of Scripture, even if there is a special attention to the Gospels.

⁵¹ Matthew 22:34-40.

⁵² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1976), 321.

⁵³ John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 29.

⁵⁴ See also Paul Hertig, "The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God's Reign in Disciple Making." *Missiology: An International Review* 29, no. 3 (2009): 348-349.

⁵⁵ Keith Ferdinando, "Mission: A Problem of Definition", *Themelios* 33, no. 1 (2008): 46-59.

⁵⁶ John 16:12-13.

Another principle about the nature of this teaching must not be neglected. It is not simply knowledge of these truths that is to be taught, but obedience. This means that teaching must be not only with words but also by example, just as it is in apprenticeship. The apostles must both instruct people in the truth *and* model lives of Christlikeness. The pattern continues in the writings of the apostle Paul, who emphasised both the things he taught and his life as a pattern of obedience to the truth.⁵⁷ The concern in disciple-making is not simply with producing people who believe the right things, but who also behave the right way. The development of disciples always entails these two means.

TWO RESOURCES FOR DISCIPLE-MAKING

Disciple-making happens through baptism and teaching. These are human activities, conducted by people. But no one can make disciples without the resources provided through the two assurances that surround Jesus' command: Jesus' universal authority (verse 18) and enduring presence (verse 20b). Jesus' first assurance is that he has received all authority from the Father. The clause "in heaven and on earth" echoes the words of the prayer he taught his disciples: "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."⁵⁸ This prayer will be answered through obedience to the Commission of the Lord Jesus who bridges between heaven and earth because he has all authority in both. In this link, Jesus is identifying himself with his Father and positioning himself as the one means through which people can come to God.

Authority is another of the themes in Matthew that is tied together in the Great Commission. Jesus' teaching had authority unlike the scribes.⁵⁹ He did not follow their custom of describing themselves as "disciples of sages."⁶⁰ Jesus was no one's disciple. The scribes built on the authority of earlier rabbis, but Jesus claimed no authority but his own. He even claimed authority to forgive sins.⁶¹ His opponents debated with him about his authority in the lead up to his crucifixion.⁶² Now that dispute is settled once and for all. Jesus, the true descendant of David,⁶³ recognised as the king of the Jews by magi from the east,⁶⁴ resistant to Satan's false offer of all the earth's kingdoms,⁶⁵ entered Jerusalem in royal triumph only to be crucified outside its walls under a mocking

⁵⁷ Philippians 4:9; 2 Timothy 3:10ff.

⁵⁸ Matthew 6:10.

⁵⁹ Matthew 7:29.

⁶⁰ Neusner, *The Four Stages*, vii.

⁶¹ Matthew 9:6.

⁶² Matthew 21:23ff.

⁶³ Matthew 1:1-17.

⁶⁴ Matthew 2:1-12.

⁶⁵ Matthew 4:8-9.

declaration of kingship.⁶⁶ Now he is revealed to be sovereign not only over Israel but over all. *All* authority has been given to him: to forgive sins and to teach. The Great Commission is the natural outworking of this authority – baptising those who trust in him for forgiveness of sins and teaching them to obey his teachings.

Recognising that Jesus presents himself as king, some scholars have described the Great Commission as an enthronement speech,⁶⁷ or at least as sharing “similar motifs” with that genre.⁶⁸ Jesus describes his reception of all authority in the past tense, indicating that his death and resurrection were his enthronement.⁶⁹ This declaration of authority received resonates with Daniel’s vision of one like a “son of man” (Jesus’ favourite self-designation in Matthew’s Gospel) receiving universal authority from the Ancient of Days.⁷⁰ The parallel is inexact, since the son of man comes with the clouds in Daniel’s vision. In his ‘little apocalypse’ in Matthew 24, Jesus linked that vision to a future time at the “close of the age” (*sunteleias aiōnos*) when he will return in glory.⁷¹ Now he tells the disciples that he has already been enthroned by the Ancient of Days through his resurrection, even if his visible revelation in glory in the clouds is future. In the interim, until the “end of the age” (*sunteleias aiōnos*, verse 20) – the same phrase as in Chapter 24 – they must make disciples who recognise him as king and surrender to him as Lord.

This presentation of himself as authoritative concludes another major theme in Matthew. Throughout his teaching ministry, Jesus has spoken of the kingdom of heaven. He now reveals himself as its king. Discipling others to Jesus equates to discipling them in the kingdom.⁷² The authority of Jesus emboldened the apostles as well as assuring them that none of the peoples to whom they would go were outside his saving power. It reminds us, too, that the commission is to make disciples of the Lord Jesus, who alone has authority.⁷³ Not followers of us, but of him. Not obedience to our will, but to his. Not a community under our control, but under him. This sets Christian disciple-making apart from the

⁶⁶ Matthew 21:1-11; 27:37.

⁶⁷ Hertig, *The Great Commission Revisited*.

⁶⁸ O’Brien, *The Great Commission*, 67-68.

⁶⁹ France, *Matthew*, 419 points to the resurrection as the enthronement. I have added the cross because John’s Gospel contains a special emphasis on the crucifixion as the exaltation of Jesus as king through the double meaning of the phrase “lifted up” (John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32,34).

⁷⁰ Daniel 7:13-14; See Craig Blomberg, “Matthew”, in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic; Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 100.

⁷¹ Matthew 24:3,30; see also Matthew 26:64.

⁷² Remember, *mathēteuó* in Matthew 13:52 refers to discipling in the kingdom.

⁷³ It is also significant that, unlike his delegation of authority over unclean spirits and to heal when he commissioned the disciples for mission within Israel in Matthew 10, the Great Commission contains no delegation of authority.

rabbinic pattern. Rabbis hoped to train others to take over from them, but Jesus remains the rabbi for all Christians. Jesus had taught his disciples that they were “not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.”⁷⁴ As Hans Kvalbein writes, “For his adherents, Jesus alone is Teacher and Master, Rabbi. A Christian is always and only a student in relation to Jesus.”⁷⁵ Disciple-making can never mean domination over those being disciplined.

The eleven men who first received the Great Commission had heard all the teaching of Jesus and had learned from him how to live. As apostle appointed by Jesus, they had authority to lay down the foundational teaching of the Church and they would pass on the faith to subsequent generations of the Church. Disciple-makers today, by contrast, have not heard and seen Jesus directly. They do, however, have faithful records of the teachings of Jesus and his apostles recorded in Scripture. The Bible is, therefore, the authoritative resource for making disciples.

Jesus’ second assurance follows closely from the thoughts that Jesus remains the Master of every believer and that Scripture is God’s means of revealing Christ to us. His promise to be with the disciples is reminiscent of several Old Testament passages in which God commissions people to his service and assures them of his presence.⁷⁶ In this New Testament equivalent, Jesus assumes the place of Yahweh. As in the two other major events in Matthew that occurred on mountaintops – his first teaching discourse and his transfiguration – Jesus is identifying himself with God.⁷⁷ This is the culmination of the theme of God present with his people in the person of Jesus that runs through Matthew from the reference to Isaiah’s Immanuel prophecy at the nativity.⁷⁸ This post-resurrection promise assures us that God’s immanent presence with his people was not a temporary interlude in history during the years of Jesus’ life on earth. It has become permanent. The Lord who commissions the disciples is not simply a figure from history on the pages of a book. He is risen and alive and will continue to be with his apostles as they go to make disciples. Within the context of the whole New Testament, we know that Jesus’ continuing presence is through the Holy Spirit who indwells his people. The empowering presence of the Spirit in mission, explicit in the commissions in Luke-Acts, is implicit here. The power to conform people to the pattern contained in the authoritative Scriptures is not in the teacher. It comes from the Spirit. Disciple-making is a process of Word and Spirit. This, as we have said already, is the vital difference

⁷⁴ Matthew 23:8.

⁷⁵ Kvalbein, “Go Therefore”, 49.

⁷⁶ See, for example: Genesis 17:4; 28:15; Exodus 4:11-12; Joshua 1:5-6, 9.

⁷⁷ Matthew 5:1; 17:1; See Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain*.

⁷⁸ Matthew 1:23.

between discipleship after Pentecost compared with discipleship before the crucifixion.

Importantly, Jesus assures the apostles that his presence will endure to the “end of the age”, indicating that the command to make disciples is not only for the disciples to whom Jesus was speaking but for Christians in all generations. It seems that after the Reformation and throughout the seventeenth century, the consensus among Protestant theologians was that “the Great Commission was binding only on the apostles.”⁷⁹ A rediscovery of the command’s enduring relevance was instrumental in the birth of Protestant global missions from the early eighteenth century onwards.⁸⁰ The continuing nature of the commission is also implicit in the command sentence of the Commission. New disciples are to be taught to obey *everything* Jesus commanded, which includes this final command to make disciples. A perpetuating chain of disciples making disciples who make disciples is set in motion.

In summary, disciples are made through baptism and biblical teaching accompanied by examples of obedience in the context of the community of believers who recognise the authority of Jesus and experience his presence through the Spirit. Its goal is total obedience to Jesus as Lord and participation in the ongoing mission of making disciples and its means is the empowering presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Understanding that all of this is at least implicit in Matthew 28 helps us to see that the emphases of the epistles on the Spirit and the Church far from departing from what Jesus said, flow from and continue his words. In the final section of this paper it remains to compare these emphases from the Great Commission with contemporary models of disciple-making.

EVALUATING MODERN DISCIPLESHIP MODELS

The purpose of this section is not to attempt a complete review of contemporary approaches to disciple-making, but to evaluate a sample of models against Matthew 28. Table 1 summarises nine models that are discussed below. Similar models operate in other contexts under different names.

⁷⁹ Harry Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 18. For a helpful exploration of the neglect of Matthew 28 as a commission to the Church throughout the ages, see Wright, “The Great Commission”, 2007.

⁸⁰ William Carey famously made the Great Commission the touchstone of his call for world missions.

TABLE 1. NINE MODELS OF DISCIPLE-MAKING

| Model | Source | Goal | Means |
|---------------|----------------------|--|--|
| Competencies | Barna, 2000, 108-111 | Developing 30 competencies in relationship to God and others to fulfil the Great Commandment and the Great Commission | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worship service for core teaching and inspiration • Learning communities (30-50 people) on Sunday mornings after service • Small groups (10-12 people) • Personal study • Optional topical classes |
| Missional | Barna, 2000, 111-114 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. More passionate commitment to Christ 2. Evaluating everything by biblical standards 3. Deep commitment to healthy family 4. Moral purity 5. Boldness in evangelism 6. Social responsibility and impact | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8-week introductory course • Small groups (8-14 people) fortnightly • Specialty classes and events for theological content and practical skills |
| Neighbourhood | Barna, 2000, 114-117 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Biblical knowledge 2. Practical ministry skills 3. Outreach 4. Prayer 5. Accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquirer's class for newcomers • Neighbourhood congregations (15-20 people) twice monthly for nurture, care and envisioning • Discipleship teams (5-9 same gender people) led by disciplers for personalised growth |

| | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------|--|--|
| | | | <p>through three-year curriculum</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specialty classes and events for theological content and practical skills |
| Organic (mentoring) | McCallum and Lowery, 2006 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Character 2. Understanding 3. Ministry capability | An individual Christian invites a person of the same sex to be discipled through weekly meetings for study and prayer for a clear vision of God's goals in the individual's life |
| Worldview | Barna, 2000, 117-119 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thinking and acting biblically 2. Increased participation in church 3. Increased service to others 4. Understanding issues and making decisions biblically | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual study (60-90mins per week) • Discovery class weekly for applied Bible study following two-year curriculum • Small groups serving together with care by peer mentors for up to three others in the group • Special events to feed into and supplement Discovery classes |
| Lecture-lab | Barna, 2000, 119-123 | Knowledge and relationships promoting godly character and enduring service | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sermons with clear application in 4-12 week themed series and accompanying individual study materials • Small groups (10-16 people) meeting for 10-weeks to apply truths from sermons, with leaders overseen by trainers |
| Coaching | Hull, 2006, 210-214 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Model basic skills of life and ministry | One-to-one relationship with multiple meetings to |

| | | | |
|---|-------------|--|--|
| | | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Motivate people 3. Point to good resources 4. Observe service, evaluate and give feedback | set goals, evaluate progress and provide feedback |
| Triads | Ogden, 2003 | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Opening hearts in transparent trust 2. Biblical truth 3. Mutual accountability | One person leads two others in a covenanted relationship through a Bible-based curriculum in weekly 90-min meetings over a year, after which each member invites two others into a new triad |
| Life-on-Life Missional Discipleship (LOLMD) | Pope, 2013 | Imparting one's life, the gospel and Scripture to others with the aim of maturity in the faith | LOLMD groups meeting weekly in covenanted relationship to work through a three-year curriculum, supplementing sermons and small groups and bridging into mission and personal growth |

There are some commonalities across these disciple-making models. Their goals are broadly similar, recognising the need for growth in knowledge that leads to life transformation. Reflecting the evangelical convictions of their authors, they are broadly agreed that Scripture sets the standard towards which people are to grow. Seen through the lens of Matthew 28, it is notable how little emphasis is placed on baptism in these contemporary models. The worldview model is an exception in emphasising baptism as a vital subject early in the process, although the other models may assume that people have already been baptised. Given, however, that many so-called 'parachurch' organisations describe their mission as making disciples but do not baptise people, baptism as an essential starting point for discipleship should not be assumed. In light of the Great Commission, what is being achieved is not truly discipleship if it does not include baptism and participation in the Church.

There are also some clear differences between models. They can be categorised into two broad groups: those that proceed primarily through one-to-one relationships (coaching, triads and LOLMD) and those that operate through

larger groups. Most models wrestle with the question of how churches' main worship services can contribute to discipleship, suggesting either small groups or one-to-one relationships as adjuncts to services through which truths learnt from the pulpit are applied in practice. The emphasis on teaching in the Great Commission suggests that corporate teaching by those gifted and appointed to teach is vital for disciple-making. At the same time, pastors must not focus so much on pulpit ministry that they have little time to relate closely to people who can see their own progress in the faith.⁸¹ They must be examples to the flock they shepherd.⁸² This must surely entail some degree of transparency as well as sharing ordinary life experiences with them in relationships within which their obedience to Jesus' commands can be seen, including dealing with their sins and weaknesses in humility. Jesus' example of living closely with his disciples, eating and travelling with them as well as engaging in formal instruction, is instructive for those who are called to be his under-shepherds in the Church.

Alongside the ministry through word and example of pastors, there is a role for every believer in modelling obedience to Jesus to one another and the close and open relationships that can develop in smaller groups would seem to be an ideal context for that. Within such relationships, the New Testament expects that believers will exhort and instruct each other.⁸³ The task of disciple-making cannot and should not be restricted to pastor-teachers. Rather, their equipping ministry should enable every member to contribute to disciple-making.

Some disciple-making models (notably the competencies and missional models) suggest that small groups for discipleship should comprise people who are similar in life-stage and interests. This approach is at variance with a number of emphases in the Great Commission. Such groups can hardly reflect the nature of the Church as a community of disciples from all nations or serve as a context for making disciples from peoples other than one's own. They may also fail to facilitate modelling of obedience by people who are further along as disciples and the idea of limiting membership is contrary to the view that baptism is the sole criterion for inclusion in the community of discipleship. Indeed, reducing discipleship into homogeneous groups may be said to be disobedient to one of the commands of Jesus the Great Commission calls us to observe: 'For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?'.⁸⁴

Some of these problems with homogeneous small groups also apply to models that advocate one-to-one disciple-making. These are often predicated on the

⁸¹ 1 Timothy 4:15.

⁸² 1 Peter 5:3.

⁸³ Colossians 3:16.

⁸⁴ Matthew 5:46.

claim that it is exemplified in the New Testament examples of Jesus with the twelve and Paul with individuals like Timothy and Titus. The proof text is 2 Timothy 2:2: “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” There are two problems with this reading of Scripture. Firstly, Jesus and Paul are not described as spending significant amounts of time alone with any individual for the purposes of discipleship. Jesus teaches the twelve as a group and his interactions with individual disciples tend to be in the hearing of the others. Other than Paul’s letters to individuals, the apostle is depicted working with a group among whom individuals like Timothy or Titus could hear and observe him. Even 2 Timothy 2:2 commands that the passing on be done to *men* (plural) rather than *a man*.

The second problem is that the twelve and Paul’s associates were being prepared not merely to be disciples, but teachers and leaders. Jesus’ and Paul’s focus on a small group of men is a model of leadership development rather than disciple-making. The epistles lack any command to one-to-one discipling of others, suggesting instead that people grow through multi-directional relationships with other believers in the Church community. Some people, especially those recognised as elders, may be outstanding examples to follow and the ministry of the Word has a pivotal part in disciple-making, but people grow as disciples together, just as the Great Commission implies. Baptism into the Church, with its diverse personalities and gifts, is the beginning of discipleship rather than an invitation into a triad or Discipleship Group.

The challenge facing churches, then, is not how to supplement existing activities with additional programmes focused on disciple-making, but how to ensure that all activities further discipleship. As several models suggest, this singular focus has implications for preaching, which should always be biblical and applied. Good teaching is not, however, an end in itself, but a means to the end of good learning. Teaching in the main gatherings may be modified with this in view to include discussion and responses or, as many models propose, supplemented with more intimate gatherings in which the truths are applied, although these should be intentionally diverse. It would seem odd not to learn from Jesus’ example of teaching his disciples, which involved not merely monologues, but also discussion, as well as a variety of formats including both didactic statements and narrative parables.

Another feature of most of the models is the proposal of a curriculum of subjects to be taught, often over a defined period of time. Whilst it may be helpful to have an idea of what truths people should know, there are dangers with this approach. It may wrongly imply an end to the process of discipleship, rather than the lifelong growth expected in the Great Commission. It may also result in a

selective approach to teaching, with content reduced to less than “all that [Jesus] commanded.” Perhaps the greatest risk of curriculum approaches, however, is that, contrary to the stated aim of models that advocate it, it may inadvertently emphasise accumulation of knowledge over life transformation. The emphasis in the coaching model on practice with feedback from the discipler mitigates against this risk, although its one-to-one nature is problematic for other reasons, as discussed above.

CONCLUSION

The concern for a renewed focus on disciple-making among evangelicals in recent decades is appropriate given the central importance of Matthew 28. Disciples are apprentices of Christ. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 establishes disciple-making as the primary task of the Church throughout the ages and calls individual believers to commit to lifelong growth in obedience to Christ. As Robert Conrad writes, “If today's disciples are to be life-long followers of Jesus in good times and bad, teaching and learning must be a vital part of their lives.”⁸⁵ The themes inherent within the Great Commission suggest that this happens most effectively in a community of baptised believers marked by strong commitment to multi-directional relationships of mutual exhortation under Christ, with pastors who are attentive both to biblical teaching Scripture and modelling biblical faithfulness. This community must notice who is missing from its number – groups of people nearby and globally who are less reached – and should expect that some of its members will go with its support to make disciples among these groups. Its disciple-making mission is underpinned by confidence that the Lord Jesus has all authority and is at work in his people by the Spirit even to the end of the age. The Christ who has all authority calls all his people to make disciples who obey all he commanded from of all nations for all time.

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⁸⁵ Robert Conrad, “Making Disciples for the 21st Century”, *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24, no. 3 (1997): 210.

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