

Following Jesus Together

Multiply

Matthew 28:16-20

Mark Vroegop

"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 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, 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 28:16–20, ESV)

Let me ask you a few questions as it relates to the subject of church multiplication:

- 1) Statistically, if a denomination wanted to "break even" with the churches that closed every year, what percentage of church plants would they need? What percentage would they need to grow?
Answer: Three percent to break even, five percent to grow, and ten percent to thrive.¹
- 2) At what age do most churches plateau? At what age do most churches decline? Answer: Most plateau at 15 years. Usually, after 35 years, they cannot replace the people that they lose.²
- 3) What are the main reasons that established churches stop growing? It is mostly due to the fact that established churches tend to turn inward, while new churches must look outward to survive.
- 4) The church-planting arm of the Southern Baptist Convention has compared new churches and established churches in terms of baptisms per 100 members. Which do you think had more?
Answer: Established churches had 3.4 baptisms per 100 while new churches had 11.7 per 100 members.

This is one of the reasons why Tim Keller has said the following:

*The vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for (1) the numerical growth of the body of Christ in a city and (2) the continual corporate renewal and revival of existing churches in a city. Nothing else – not crusades, outreach programs, parachurch ministries, growing megachurches, congregational consulting, nor church renewal processes – will have the consistent impact of dynamic, extensive church planting.*³

Launching new congregations is the most effective way to both reach a city and to create on-going renewal in an established church. That is the reason we launched the Next Door Mission in 2015, why

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/june/5-reasons-established-churches-should-plant-churches.html>

² <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/september/36.68.html>

³ http://download.redeemer.com/pdf/learn/resources/Why_Plant_Churches-Keller.pdf

we've started the Fishers congregation, and why we are commissioning the Castleton congregation today.

But the Next Door Mission was not only about launching new congregations. It was designed to help all of us to think differently and intentionally about multiplication. As the church multiplies, it forces us to ask really important questions about how we raise up future leaders and effectively create a disciple-making culture and to determine our strategy for seeing all this happen.

Today is the last message in our series called Following Jesus Together. So far, we've looked at our mission and how it connects to each of us personally. We've explored the importance of belonging. And we've discovered the beautiful and Jesus-centered vision of spiritual growth.

Our final message is focused on the theme of multiply. It is the final aspect of our strategy of BELONG – GROW – MULTIPLY.

The basic mission for those who represent Jesus on earth is to “multiply by making disciples.” I'd like to explore what that really means and what it could look like in our lives. My hope is to show you that the **Christian life requires multiplication – intentional spiritual replication**. In other words, if you are a follower of Jesus, you were made to multiply.

Our text, and this theme, is one that many of you have heard before.⁴ It is commonly called “The Great Commission.” It is Jesus' final charge to His disciples regarding their mission on earth after He returns to heaven. After spending over three years together, listening to Jesus' teaching, observing and performing miracles, and witnessing his death and resurrection, Jesus gives His disciples their mission:

“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...” (Matthew 28:19–20a, ESV)

How does this mission, so often relegated to foreign missions or pastoral ministry, relate to a strategy for making disciples? I'd like to help us understand this by answering three key questions:

- 1. Who is Called to Multiply?**
- 2. What are the Basics of Multiplication?**
- 3. What Should Multiplication Look Like?**

My hope is that you'll be able to answer one really important question at the end: “What is my next step?”

Who is Called to Multiply?

The passage begins by setting the context for this Great Commission. We learn that there are eleven disciples. Judas would have been the twelfth, but his betrayal and suicide have removed him from the

⁴ Much of the material in this message was a part of my sermon entitled “The Ordinary Calling” - <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/the-calling-of-ordinary/>.

disciples. They gather in Galilee, the home for many of the disciples, the starting point of Jesus' ministry, and a great setting for the beginning of a mission to the Gentiles.

They gather on a specific mountain where Jesus had instructed them to meet. Mountains were important meeting places for Jesus and his disciples as well as a place where divine messages were delivered (Cf. Matthew 5:1, 15:29, 17:1, 24:3). The setting was a fitting place for what will follow.

Now verse 17 is especially significant. It shows us the unvarnished humanity of the disciples: *"And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted."* (Matthew 28:17, ESV) Matthew could have easily left this particular verse out, or he could have left out part of the verse. But we discover that when Jesus appears, there was both worship and doubt, either in the same group of disciples or in the same hearts of some of the disciples. We are not sure exactly what Matthew has in mind. However, it is very clear that these followers of Jesus are weak, struggling, and very much in process when they encounter Jesus.

Despite all that they had seen, heard, and experienced, some of them are still struggling to not doubt. Or maybe a better way to say it is that in their doubt, they were still worshipping. It is very clear that the disciples are very human. They are anything but heroes.

Before we say anything about the mission that Jesus entrusts to them, I think it is worth noting that they were very ordinary men. We know for sure that Peter, James, and John were fisherman, but it is also likely that two or three others were fisherman or tradesmen as well. Matthew was a converted tax collector, and Simon was a zealot, a member of an insurrectionist group that wanted to overthrow Rome. They were a group that did not come from the halls of power, the highly educated, or the spiritual class of people.

In Acts 4, Peter and John are hauled before the Sanhedrin under charges of healing in Jesus' name. The religious leaders were astonished at their answers.

"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus." (Acts 4:13, ESV)

Now, does it encourage you that the disciples are just ordinary men? It should. In a few verses, we are going to hear about Jesus' all-encompassing authority and the Great Commission. The power and the scope of what Jesus is going to say is stunning

Jesus is going to entrust His mission to imperfect, struggling, and weak disciples. One commentator said this: "Christians are both believers and doubters, adoring and wondering, trusting and questioning. Is it not refreshing that Matthew admits this?"⁵ Jesus' disciples have always been ordinary people who were entrusted with an extraordinary mission.

⁵ Fredrick Bruner, *Commentary on Matthew – Vol 2*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), 810.

And what an effect they had. Do you know what happened to them? These common men took the gospel message and multiplied themselves all over the world. According to two first century historians, here is what happened to the disciples:

- Andrew, the brother of Peter, preached the gospel in modern-day Georgia and in the Black Sea region.
- Bartholomew (Nathanael) went to India after bringing the gospel to modern-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.
- Peter preached the gospel through Turkey and was probably instrumental in starting the church in Rome.
- Matthew not only published the gospel that bears his name, but he brought the gospel to Iran, especially to the city of Parthia.
- Thaddeus was a missionary to Edessa and the surrounding areas of Turkey, Syria, and Iraq.
- Philip was a missionary in Eastern Turkey after preaching in Samaria, as recorded in Acts 8.
- Thomas (Doubting Thomas) preached the gospel to people in modern-day Iran and Afghanistan.
- Matthias, Simon the Zealot, James the son of Alpheus, and James the son of Zebedee were all involved in the ministry in Jerusalem.
- John was banished to the Isle of Patmos, but he wrote the Gospel of John, 1-3 John, and the book of Revelation.

But it didn't stop there. In the book of Acts, the early church and the ministry of the Apostle Paul, we see ordinary people who multiply disciples. I've just finished a fascinating book by Phil Newton called "The Mentoring Church." He pieces together a number of the people and relationships in the early church:

- Barnabas emerges as a leader in the Jerusalem church. He validates the work of God in Paul's life, is sent to Antioch, and is eventually sent out of the church in Antioch with Paul for missionary service.
- Paul had a wide array of people who could trace their discipleship back to him. Among them would be Silas, John Mark, Timothy, and Titus. Those are the well-known ones. But there are more.
- Aristarchus, Secundus, and Gaius were a part of his ministry. Tychicus was sent to Ephesus and Colossae, and he replaced Timothy at the church at Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:12). Trophimus was likely a part of the Paul's church planting effort on the island of Crete.

In a moment, we are going to look at the scope and depth of this calling, but before we look at that, I want to suggest to you that there is a calling that every Christian has upon his or her life. Christianity spread from twelve disciples who multiplied themselves.

God is on a mission to reach the world, and His strategy is to use people in that mission, so this message applies to every single person who calls him or herself a follower of Jesus.

What are the Basics of Multiplication?

Now that we understand to whom the calling is given, let's see if we can understand the significance and meaning of what Jesus says in verses 18-20. Many of you are used to hearing these verses in the context of a message about foreign missions, and it certainly applies to that. However, although our global mission is extremely important, it is only one application of this mission.

The mission and its characteristics are laid out for us:

1. Rooted in the authority of Jesus. The mission that the disciples are about to receive is something that is a derivative of Jesus' victory. Jesus says "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me." By virtue of his death and resurrection, the Father has given him "the name that is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). With this name comes authority, which in Matthew's gospel is how he distinguishes Jesus from the other religious leaders (Matt. 7:29), how he describes Jesus' power to forgive and heal (9:6), what he gives to His disciples (10:1), and what makes Him a credible teacher (21:23-27). For Matthew, the authority of Jesus means that He is Lord. The Great Commission is rooted in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

2. A movement. Verse 19 begins with the important word "Go," and Jesus says this in light of his previous comment about all authority being given to Him. The mission of Jesus is a movement, which means that He envisions them not staying on the mountain but spreading, reaching, moving, and growing. In other words, there is a "tilt" or a "lean" when it comes to being a disciple of Jesus. The posture of a Christian is moving toward people, not away from people. There is a bias for action in the Christian life. We are called to "Go." Sometimes that involves leaving your country and your extended family. Sometimes that involves another language and culture. But the call to "go" is not just for missionaries. The central idea here is that the followers of Jesus do not gather just to gather. They gather to be scattered. It means that their central ministry is not only caring one another; it is doing that because of their movement. The mission of Jesus requires movement. It is a movement.

That is one of the reasons that we should rejoice that in last 10 years we've deployed 23 couples or singles to head to the mission field. We planted Nehemiah Bible Church with Cory Johnson, assisted Joseph Rhea in helping to plant a church with Soma, trained eleven residents, launched Dan Weller to Living Faith, Tim Whitney to Perry Hall Church in Baltimore, Chris Beals, Dustin Crowe and 200 people to Fishers, Eric Swanson, Luke Jones and 170 people to Castleton, and Luke Humphrey to plant a church in Dubai.

3. The Goal is disciple-making. The mission and its movement have a purpose and a goal. That goal is simply to "make disciples." It is interesting to note that Jesus doesn't use words like convert, preach to, or to win.⁶ Instead, he uses a word that is more organic, more slowly developed, and yet more personal for them. They are His disciples, and His command involves them making disciples.

The word discipleship is always hard to define. As a pastor, I have frequently encountered two extremes when it comes to this word and its definition. First, I have found that some people define

⁶ Bruner, 815.

discipleship institutionally. Therefore, discipleship is merely a series of classes or a program in which one is engaged. Discipleship for them means that someone is “in the system.” Discipleship is a class you take. On the other hand, I have also found people who define discipleship experientially. They base their definition on either really good experiences or really bad experiences of discipleship in their young adult years. For them, discipleship is a very personal, intimate, and relational process. Discipleship in this model is really spiritual mentoring or coaching.

I think that there are elements of truth to both of these. People are certainly disciplined in a class as well as in a highly relational setting. But when you take the command “make disciples” in its context, it is simply Jesus saying to His disciples, “Do to other people what I have done to you.” Whatever Jesus did to the disciples, they are now charged with doing the same thing.

Therefore, my definition of disciple-making would simply be “**intentional spiritual replication.**” It seems to me that this is what Jesus did with His disciples. He did it in a variety of ways, in many different settings, and it wasn’t the same for each of His disciples. But His life’s mission was to intentionally and spiritually replicate Himself in the disciples.

4. Involves evangelism and obedience-oriented efforts. What are the core ingredients in making disciples? The text tells us pretty clearly. There are two participles that are connected to the command “make disciples.” First, disciples are made as they are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Bible frequently links baptism with conversion because it marks “going public” with one’s relationship with Jesus (see Acts 2:37-38). So, making disciples, first and foremost, means that a person trusts Christ as his or her savior and becomes a follower of Jesus. Disciple-making starts with evangelism.

Second, it involves obedience-oriented instruction as indicated by the next participial phrase: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). To make disciples is to impart truth such that it works in the lives of others. Therefore, disciple-making cannot just be relegated to teaching alone or to actions alone. Disciples are those who know and live truth. Disciples are those who learn by listening, watching, and living. It is the truth of the Word worked out in people’s lives.

Remember, this is the target of our “going.” Our aim is a ***movement of intentional spiritual replication through evangelism and obedience-oriented living.***

5. Aim is to saturate the world. Where is this mission meant to happen? What is the hope when it is difficult? Both answers are stunning. The scope of this mission is everywhere. Verse 19 says, “make disciples of all nations.” The mission of God on the earth is no longer to be limited to the Jews or to the city of Jerusalem. Jesus desires that all the families of the earth are blessed by this disciple-making mission (Gen. 12:1-3). The scope of this mission is to have the gospel saturate the earth, looking forward to the day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God like the waters cover the sea (Hab. 2:14). And our role in that mission is to 1) make disciples everywhere and 2) everywhere we go, to make disciples.

6. Promise of the personal presence of Jesus. The final characteristic of this mission is often overlooked. The statement *“Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* can be treated like the sunset in a missionary presentation or the credits in a movie. But there is so much more here than that.

Jesus promised that as His disciples carry out His mission, they will never, ever lack His presence with them. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the personal presence of Christ is mediated to Christ’s disciples as they scatter into the world. Therefore, there is hope that no matter what happens, the believer will always have the presence of Jesus in his or her life.

But this statement is not just about comfort. It is also reflecting the fact that we are not just saturating the world with information; we are introducing people to Jesus. In the accomplishment of the mission we are taking Jesus to people. We are leading people to Jesus. We are making people into disciples of Jesus.

If discipleship is intentional spiritual replication, then the ultimate aim is for people to look like Jesus. Our mission is to introduce them to Jesus, to teach them about Jesus, and to show them how to walk like Jesus so that together we look like Jesus.

Do you see this as the calling for all of us? Do you see that the divinely given strategy for accomplishing Jesus’ mission involves a critical mindset when it comes to how we think about our lives?

What Should Multiplication Look Like?

My aim this morning has been to highlight the critical importance of disciple-making. I want all of us to think about being engaged in a movement of intentional spiritual replication.

This assumes, of course, that there is something to replicate. You cannot replicate nothing. So, from a spiritual standpoint this mission does not apply to you if you are not a follower of Jesus. In fact, if you have not given your heart and life to Jesus, you are our mission right now. We want you to turn from your sin, trust in Jesus, and then to replicate yourself.

Part of the challenge with talking about disciple-making is that it is designed to be all-encompassing and the flavoring of the Christian life in many different contexts. Disciple-making is bigger than a single category. Let me show you:

Discipleship is both corporate and personal. When we gather, sing together, learn together, worship together, and spend time together around the Word, that is discipleship. There is something powerful and helpful about the large gathering of God’s people. The Holy Spirit uses the official and large-scale gathering of the church for discipleship. But that is not all there is.

Discipleship is also very personal and individually oriented. Our aim is to present “everyone mature in Christ” (Col1:28). Discipleship happens through the corporate gathering and the personal interactions, conversations, one-on-one times, and how we care for one another. Discipleship happens one person at a time.

Discipleship is both structural and relational. The life blood of discipleship is relationships. People make disciples. But the structure of those programs, resources, or events creates the context for those relationships. The challenge is just to be sure that we don't limit discipleship to one or the other. In other words, become a member, join a small group, and come on Sunday mornings, and use those structures as the place where you build relationships with other people. Schedule time in your calendar, have people over, meet a friend for coffee, but be sure to use those moments for one another's discipleship. Ask yourself, "What should be different about this moment or event because of my mission as a disciple-maker?" Intentional spiritual replication requires the intersection of relationships with gospel purpose.

Discipleship is both formal and informal. Making disciples can be a formal and official relationship – like an established accountability partner, a 1:1 discipleship meeting, or having a mentor. I would commend these to you and encourage you to either be discipled or consider discipling someone. But it can also look like a gospel-centered conversation when you are riding in the car with your teenager, the sharing of what you are reading in the Bible while on a 5k run, or stopping and praying after this service for someone who is struggling and hurting.

Discipleship is both global and local. Making disciples is the fuel behind global missions. Unreached people will never hear about the gospel and will never become followers of Jesus unless someone goes to tell them. Reaching all nations is the end-game for our mission. But so is your neighbor, your co-worker, the barista at Starbucks, the guy at the gym, and anyone in proximity to where you live your life. And I want you to think with me about where God has placed you.

Why has He placed you in your neighborhood? Why did He cause you to cross paths with that person last week? Why has this person's sin issue surfaced in your small group? Why did God give you the teenager in your home? Why did you have that great conversation with someone at a wedding last weekend? Why are you sitting next to the person in this room? All of these questions are a part of the beautiful plan of God in the world.

God is on a mission to save people from their sins and make them into the beautiful and compelling likeness of Jesus. He is on the move, wooing people to Himself and changing them! It is a beautiful mission, and one that He entrusts to ordinary people. He calls us to make disciples – to be involved in intentional spiritual replication.

Jesus gathered eleven disciples on a mountain in Galilee, and He told them to "Go and make disciples." And these ordinary men, entrusted with an extraordinary message, changed the world! And God is still doing that today. The revolution of the gospel is still spreading through multiplication. The Christian life requires multiplication

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