

# MAKE DISCIPLES, NOT JUST CONVERTS

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Now let us look at the words of the Lord Jesus that we find in Matthew 28:18-20, Christ's Great Commission. The first thing that catches our attention is the declaration in verse 18: "All authority has been given to me, in heaven and on earth." In other words, Jesus declares Himself to be the Sovereign of the Universe, the Greatest. This declaration embodies at least two consequences for Christ's followers.

First, it is a basic condition for success that we know that our Commander is the Greatest. It is this unshakable certainty that will enable us to face the enemy and adverse circumstances without fear or vacillation.

Next, any order given by the Highest Authority of the universe demands total attention and absolute respect. To begin, such respect should translate into close attention to the precise meaning of the order. We must define the semantic content as completely and exactly as possible. When our Master gives an order He obviously expects to be obeyed, correctly and completely. So then, let us consider the semantic content of the command.

## What Does the Command Mean?

A strict translation could go something like this: "As you go, disciple all ethnic nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep everything that I have commanded you." (We could also translate, "make disciples in all ethnic nations".) We observe that only one verb is imperative, namely 'to disciple'. It follows that the essence of the order will be found in this verb. I am aware that we are used to reading the verb 'to go' as if it were imperative also, but it is not—it is a past participle. Therefore it may not carry the main action, it is circumstantial. If we just think about it a bit I believe it will become clear. One 'goes' so as to arrive where he intends to work. One could spend his whole life 'going' and never do anything, a professional tourist. The Lord Jesus assumes that we will be going, or have already gone (strictly speaking the translation would be "having gone"). In other words, wherever each one may be, in line with God's will for each, the command is to make disciples.

The command is to make **disciples**. Unfortunately the Authorized Version misleads us with the rendering "teach"—the verb 'to teach' does indeed come at the beginning of verse 20, but is not in verse 19. (In passing we may note that almost all the Greek MSS that have this passage [95%] do not have the word 'therefore', which is why I did not include it in my rendering.) Given that the command is to make disciples, the first thing we need to do is understand the precise meaning that Jesus gave to the word 'disciple', because therein lies the essence of the order.

So then, what did **Jesus** understand by 'disciple'? The immediate context gives us a good idea, because verse 20 says: "teaching them to keep everything that I have commanded you." That means that making disciples involves **teaching** (not just preaching). But, teaching what? Teaching to keep (that is, obey) everything that Jesus commanded. But since one does not obey something he does not know about, we must begin by teaching the commands themselves, all of them. Now, is that really what we are doing in our churches, by and large?

I invite the reader's attention to Luke 14:25-33, the only passage that preserves in Christ's own words His definition of 'disciple', where He uses the word so there can be no doubt what He is describing (the concept of discipleship is doubtless present in other passages too, but since the word 'disciple' does not occur the point could be disputed). Three times we encounter the expression "cannot be my disciple", an expression that is emphatic in the original Text. The effect is to present us with three absolute conditions—if you do not meet them there is no way you can be Jesus' **disciple**. So, let us consider these conditions.

### **"Hate"**

We find the first condition in verse 26. "If anyone comes to me but does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my

disciple." What a difficult statement! Are we really supposed to "hate", and particularly those who are nearest and dearest to us? Does not God command us to love? This is really a hard word; what can Jesus mean by it? It should be understood in comparative terms, as in the parallel passage in Matthew 10:37: "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."

In other words, if I propose to follow Jesus as His disciple He demands that I place my relationship with Him above every relationship in this life, be it with father, mother, wife, children or myself (which is the bottom line). Jesus demands first place, without competition. Now then, whoever maintains such a relationship with Sovereign Jesus will now and again be obliged (by Jesus Himself) to act in ways that those who do not have such a relationship with Him will not understand. They will not know how to interpret his attitude correctly. They will mistake it for carelessness, belittling, disdain, even hate. Consider the following.

On more than one occasion I have had someone tell me to my face that I must disdain my wife and children in that I took them to live in an 'Indian' village in the middle of the Amazon jungle. They just could not understand my course of action. How could a husband and father with my training and abilities possibly expose his family to such a difficult, primitive and even dangerous life, depriving them of the comfort and advantages of the city? They could only interpret my attitude as irresponsible, at best.

And how many missionaries, whose parents did not share the ideals of their children, when it came to the leave-taking, that difficult hour when they were about to embark for a foreign shore, have not heard from the lips of their own parents words to this effect: "My son, you must hate us, you are abandoning us, you are throwing your life away; how can you do this?!" In their distress the parents use just such language—they interpret their child's action as irresponsibility, disdain, even hate. So we see that Jesus was not exaggerating, He was not being ridiculous when He said "hate".

However, I wish to pursue the question of acting responsibly. Did I act irresponsibly by taking my family to live in the jungle? Which is better, the jungle with Jesus or the city without Him? If I take my family to the jungle in obedience to Jesus' command then He must accept responsibility for the consequences. If I remain in the city against His will then I am the one who must answer for it. The question is both serious and practical—I know a man who understood clearly that he had a missionary call, but he did not obey; he "could not" subject his wife to such a life.

Actually, the Old Testament gives us the account of certain men that took a similar position. I am thinking of the 'warriors' of Israel at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13 and 14). On God's calendar it was time to invade the promised land, but ten of the twelve spies discouraged the crowd and they rebelled against God's order, an order that had already been given. To justify their attitude the men used their families—if they obeyed they would be killed, and then what would happen to the women and children? As if that were not enough, they made a counter proposal to God: it would be better to die right there. (It is dangerous to offer God a counter proposal, because He is likely to accept it, as in this case.) As a result they spent 38 more years wandering in the desert (see Deuteronomy 2:14) until each one of the men who voted against God in Kadesh Barnea died. Not a single one crossed the Jordan. As for the women and children, the supposed excuse for the disobedience, God caused them to enter the promised land!

My brethren, better by far to face any danger than to disobey the known will of God. Do not even think of making a counter proposal! Our Master takes full responsibility for the consequences of His orders, when they are obeyed. The way to be really irresponsible is to deprive your family of God's protection, exposing them to the consequences of your disobedience. A true disciple of Christ will choose to 'hate' his family, and his own life, rather than disobey. That is the way it is supposed to be.

### ***"Bear your Cross"***

We find the second condition in verse 27 (Luke 14). "Whoever does not bear his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." What do you suppose the Lord means by "cross"? Would it be the ornament some people wear, some problem in your life or that neighbor you cannot stand? No. Two thousand years ago 'cross' represented just one thing—death. It represented a form of execution, in fact the most shameful one at the time (with prolonged suffering). Luke 9:23 sheds more light on this matter: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross each day, and follow me."

The semantic content of the verb "bear" (Luke 14:27) gives the idea of continuous action. Here in Luke 9:23 we must take up our cross "each day"—evidently it is a daily dying that is called for.

Indeed, the Apostle Paul uses just such an expression in 1 Corinthians 15:31, saying that he died daily. But how are we to understand that statement? Clearly it does not refer to physical death. What then? I believe the "let him deny himself" of Luke 9:23 gives us the necessary clue. It is death to self, to one's own ideas, ambitions and desires; it is to give up my supposed right to run my own life. And this disposition must be renewed each day, and maybe every hour. Romans 12:1 says it a different way when it speaks of presenting our bodies as a "living sacrifice".

But does not that phrase seem a little strange to you? In the Old Testament, among all those sacrificed animals, was there ever a "living" sacrifice? When and how did an animal become a sacrifice? Was it not when its throat was cut and its blood shed? So there were only dead sacrifices. But Paul speaks of a "living" sacrifice. I believe it refers to the same thing as "bear your cross"—it is to live dying, to die constantly. It is to deny yourself at every step. And Jesus affirms that without this attitude it is impossible to be His disciple.

### ***"Renounce All You Own"***

The third condition is in verse 33 (Luke 14). "So also, whoever among you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." The "so also" links this verse to the two illustrations given in verses 28-32. I would say that those illustrations relate to the act of entering the relationship of disciple, which will be treated presently, but it is worth noting that we are looking at a deliberate, considered decision, an act of the will. And nothing else will do, because Jesus demands complete renunciation, unconditional surrender—in short, "all that we have".

Taking the three conditions together, they can be taken as three different ways of saying the same thing. Although one condition deals with relationships, another with ambitions and the third with possessions, they are all expressions of one basic reality. Our Lord Jesus Christ requires total commitment! Now we can affirm the definition that the Lord gave to 'disciple'. To Jesus, a disciple is someone who is totally committed to **HIM**.

Returning to Matthew 28:19, we can give a clear meaning to the command. We are ordered to make disciples—**disciples**, not merely believers or converts—**disciples**, in the sense that the Lord Jesus gives to the term—**disciples**, people whose lives really and truly revolve around Christ's Cause and Will, people who are living with a view to the Kingdom, in very truth!

### **The Strategic Effect**

So, how are our churches doing it, by and large? In general the focus is on evangelism, is it not? We are concerned to 'win souls', to see people 'get saved'. (That is in the churches that still believe the Bible; there are others that are little better than social clubs and are already in the enemy's hand.) In 'traditional' or 'historical' churches the new believer is urged to attend the services and participate in the life of the church; if he wants to be really good he should be a tither. In 'pentecostal' or 'charismatic' churches the new believer should also seek the 'second blessing'; once he has been 'baptized in the Spirit' then he has really arrived. But who is making disciples of the sort that Jesus commanded?

What might the practical consequence of our emphasis be? It is precisely the tragic picture that has already been presented: half the people in the world have yet to hear the Gospel; a third of the ethnic nations still lack a spokesman of Christ. Of necessity. The emphasis on merely winning souls fills the churches with children, children spiritually (regardless of physical age). So, what is wrong with that? Well, do children work? Children don't work, they **make work** (and how!). My dear friends, we are face to face with a problem as big as the world, literally. Even though it may hurt, we need to study this matter objectively and with courage—the eternal destiny of the world is at stake.

### ***Abandoned Children Are Bad News!***

What should we think of a man who goes around fathering children without giving a thought to food, shelter, education, in short the necessary care for those children? We will be perfectly justified in

calling him irresponsible, an enemy of our society. Yes, because he will be contributing abandoned children to our society, and in all probability many, if not most, of them will become delinquent and criminal elements. Abandoned children are bad news! I would like to suggest for the reader's careful consideration that there is an almost perfect analogy between the physical and spiritual realms in this matter.

When we give birth to spiritual children (so to speak), but do not disciple them, do not lead them to a total commitment to Jesus, do not help them to become spiritual adults, we reap a variety of negative consequences. What makes a pastor age prematurely? Is it the unbelievers out in the world, or is it the childishness in the church? Obviously it is the spiritual childishness in the church. (One might observe in passing that justice may be served, because when a pastor only preaches evangelistic sermons he himself is mainly responsible—he does not feed the sheep. Goat food is no good for sheep.)

In doing personal evangelism what is the most frequent objection one hears? Is it not the way believers live? It is spiritual childishness in the church. And then there are the 'scalded cats'—those who say, "I used to be a believer". What do you suppose happened? Presumably he listened to the preaching, responded to the invitation, followed the instructions and gave signs of life, participating in the activities of the church. But then Satan landed on him, the Christian life was not the 'bed of roses' it was supposed to be, there were more problems than blessings. And since nobody explained what was happening, nobody disciplined him, he began to be discouraged, to become perplexed, to feel disillusioned and abandoned. So he begins to withdraw, and before you know it has fallen away. Now he is a 'scalded cat', he has been 'vaccinated'. To win him back is hard work, not to mention the negative ripples that have gone out to his family and neighborhood.

When we think of the unreached peoples of the world the problem of the spiritual childishness in the churches becomes critical. We need soldiers, and children are not very good at that. Fortunately few of them offer themselves. But it does happen that not everyone who volunteers, and who winds up being sent to the mission field, is a disciple—some are little better than children. And if a child tries to do a man's work, will the job be done properly? Not likely. The child, poor thing, is doing the best that he can, but he does not have the strength, knowledge, experience or ability of a man. He is a child. A lost and dying world needs adults, it needs disciples.

Dear people, let us be responsible parents! It is terribly, tragically irresponsible to give birth to children (in the spiritual realm too) without accepting the natural and necessary consequences—to feed them, protect them and train them until they become adults. **Abandoned children are bad news.** I believe that our Master's example is very much to the point.

### ***The Example of Christ, and of Paul***

What procedure did the Lord Jesus use during His three years of ministry here in this world? With whom did He spend most of His time? Was it not with twelve men? They walked together, ate together, slept in the same place, heard and observed all that the Master did, during two years. And Jesus staked everything on those men. When He returned to Heaven the future of the Church was in their hands. If they had failed altogether the Church would have been finished before it got properly started.

And when Jesus was dealing with the crowds, what did He do? Did He promote evangelistic campaigns? It is not in the record. What the Sacred Text does record is that in the main He **taught** the people, sometimes the whole day. That is because Jesus wanted disciples. At any given time the well-being of the Church depends on the disciples that are in existence.

It would appear that the Apostle Paul, at least, understood Christ's example and strategy, because he too was concerned to make disciples. As he said goodbye to the church in Ephesus he affirmed: "I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20), and again: "I did not avoid declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (verse 27). Paul did not limit himself to an evangelistic message—he wanted disciples. I gather that his main purpose in writing his epistles was to help the believers become disciples. Colossians 1:28 says it well: "whom [Christ] we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus."

Ephesians 4:11-13 is even more to the point, because Paul ascribes this purpose to Christ Himself. He it was who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to the Church, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." In other words, Christ wants **disciples**, in the sense that was explained above. In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul makes clear that there are to be successive generations of disciples, presumably until the return of Christ.

So what was the result when the Apostles followed this strategy? They reached their world in their generation. And if we regain the same emphasis, should not we also be able to reach our world in this generation? I believe so. Let us see how it can work.

### ***How it Works***

To make disciples takes time and may be uncomfortable, but it is the fastest and surest way to effectively reach the world. At first glance this may seem unreasonable. In fact, the idea that seems to prevail in today's evangelical world is mass evangelism—we must win as many souls as possible. The more souls and the less time, the better. The only trouble is that it does not work. It may yield an apparent rapid growth, but the work will collapse for lack of an adequate foundation and infrastructure. Children don't work, they make work.

To make a disciple one must spend time with him, like Jesus did. And we need to be open and honest; we must not pretend to be 'super-saints' that have no problems, never sin, are never attacked by Satan, etc. We must explain the reason for things, give 'hands on' orientation, really ground them in the faith. (It is possible to attain the category of 'disciple' on your own, but it tends to be a long and painful process, precisely for lack of orientation.)

It may appear to be too slow, but it winds up being the fastest. Let us just suppose that I am the only true disciple of Christ in the world today (obviously that is not true, and thank God it is not!), just for the sake of the argument. Let us say that this year I manage to make one disciple—I not only win a soul but I teach and establish him, I lead him to really commit himself to Jesus. So then there will be two of us, right?

(Perhaps someone is questioning the possibility of making a disciple in a year. The main secret is in a total commitment to Jesus. Until someone yields in this way his spiritual growth will be slow, if there is any—we have all seen how it goes, three steps forward and two (or three) steps back. When we acknowledge Christ's right to rule us we give the Holy Spirit free rein to work in our lives and may grow rapidly, reaching levels of spirituality that most Christians do not even dream of.)

Returning to our 'argument', during the next year each of us makes another disciple—we not only win two souls but we teach and establish them, we lead them to really commit themselves to Jesus. And then there will be four of us, right? The third year we four each win and disciple one more, which makes eight. (You do not have to be a renowned evangelist; you do not have to win 300 souls a year; just win one, provided you also disciple him.) The fourth year we double again, which brings us to sixteen. If we repeat this procedure year by year at the end of ten years we will have 1,024 disciples! Can you imagine it? What pastor would not be pleased if he planted a church and after ten years' work had 1,000 members? But let us move on and look at the second decade.

If we continue at the same rate, we will finish the eleventh year with 2,048 disciples. Doubling each year we will finish the second decade with all of 1,048,576 disciples! Then the 21st year we would have 2,097,152, and so on until the end of the third decade when we would have 1,073,741,824 disciples. That is right, more than one **billion** as the result of only thirty years of disciple making, each one making one more per year. If we kept on for just four additional years we would reach the figure of over 17 billion. Of course, there are less than seven billion people in the world today, so we could lose over half of our total on the way and still reach the world within 34 years! What do you say, shall we go for it?

But, wait just a minute. That was if we started with only one, but of course there are many more. Do you suppose there might be one million true disciples (not just believers) in the world today? I believe so, and there are doubtless many more. Well then, that being the case we can subtract twenty years from the 34 that would be needed to reach the world. Surely, because according to the suggested

plan it would take twenty years to get from one to a million. So if we already have over a million disciples we could finish reaching the world **within fourteen years**. Fair enough?

I know that you have already thought of several objections. That plan is too ideal; it does not allow for the numerous barriers that exist: barriers ideological, political and religious, barriers of geography, language and culture, the barrier of human weakness with its many manifestations, and above all the barrier of satanic and demonic activity in the world. So where does all that leave us? Well, I recognize the existence of all those barriers, and they are indeed imposing, but our Commander is greater. The barriers of ideology, politics and religion we may circumvent using the weapons mentioned in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, while the activity of Satan and his angels (the demons) we can defeat using the full range of spiritual weapons that Sovereign Jesus has placed at our disposal (see the essays on spiritual warfare). Nor should we forget the "key of David" (Revelation 3:7). As for the barriers of geography, language and culture, we can overcome them with modern technology—the tools and techniques we have are already good and are getting better. And human weakness? The solution is precisely a life of discipleship, with the power and enabling of the Spirit of God.

(A word of caution is called for here: by 'discipleship' I mean the process of being and making disciples of **Jesus**, not of ourselves. Many times the obsessions of a discipler or the founder of a movement become 'doctrine' for his followers and sooner or later they wind up in the ditch. Let us make disciples of **Jesus**; let us lead others to depend directly on the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, not on us. In this way the ones whom we disciple may free themselves from our errors, since we all err.)

There are a few other things that may be said in relief of possible objections. The plan speaks of making only one disciple per year, but in fact we can make more—one thinks immediately of the multiplied millions of believers and nominal Christians that could be disciplined in shorter periods of time. The strategy presented in chapter II deals with the problem of the poor geographic distribution of disciples at the moment. It is well to remember also that we will never win everybody—there will always be those who knowingly and deliberately reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus never told us to **win** everybody (that would violate their will); rather we are to make sure that each person hears and has an intelligent choice. The plan presented above gave the theoretical possibility of discipling the world within fourteen years, but that will not happen (not everyone will become a disciple). According to Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15 our objective is to see some true disciples within each ethnic nation and to give each person an informed chance to embrace the Gospel. So then, with all those explanations and allowances don't you think we can accept the challenge of fulfilling our Master's orders within a few years? Let us give it a good try!

## **Implementing the Strategy**

Now let us look at how to implement this strategy. There are at least three questions that must be considered, but first I want to return to the command in Matthew 28:19: "Make disciples in all ethnic nations." Considering the precise meaning we have established for this command I understand two things. First, the order is to make **disciples**, nothing more and nothing less.

Second, it seems to me to be obvious that before one can make disciples he must first **be** a disciple (no?). How could I lead someone else to surrender unconditionally to Jesus when I myself refuse to do so? Or how can I guide someone else along the path of discipleship if I have never been there? That being the case, until I am a disciple I remain out of the real action—I can scarcely do much toward fulfilling Christ's Great Commission. And that goes for you, too. It follows that the first thing we need to verify is whether we are genuine disciples. Which leads us to the first question: how to be a disciple.

### ***How to Be a Disciple***

The question divides naturally into two parts: how to enter the relationship of disciple and then how to maintain it, in practice. So, how do we enter the relationship? If we may compare the life of a disciple to a path that must be traveled (daily), then entering is like passing through the gate that gives access to the path.

I understand that entering the relationship of disciple involves a deliberate submission, an act of the will. I imagine it is possible for someone to be converted almost on an impulse, like a leap in the dark.

He is in despair; someone comes up and gives a superficial presentation of the plan of salvation; he accepts it, albeit with little understanding. But becoming a disciple is different. I believe the two illustrations in Luke 14:28-32 are to the point.

Recall that in verse 33, as He gave the third condition, Jesus said, "so also". He was referring to the two examples He had just given. A man wanted to build a tower. A king heard that a neighboring king was already marching against him with 20,000 men, and he only had 10,000. What to do? In each case the man studies the situation, checks his own resources, considers the cost, tries to foresee the probable consequences. Then he makes his decision; to build or refrain, to fight or surrender. Whatever he decides to do, he must accept the consequences of his choice. That is the way it is with discipleship—you begin with a studied choice, by taking a deliberate position. I believe that is what Paul wrote about in Romans 12:1 when he spoke of presenting our bodies as living sacrifices. The word 'bodies' is presumably a case of synecdoche, where the body represents the life (can I separate the soul from the body and still function in this world?). The verb 'present' refers to the act of the will, without reservations. My friend, have you surrendered unconditionally to Jesus? If not, you are not His disciple and are not qualified to make disciples.

I am well aware that this presentation may be somewhat troubling to the reader—it may appear that I am being a bit too radical or demanding, a little too 'open and shut'. I know. That is because I start with a radical definition of 'disciple', precisely the definition given by the Lord Jesus in Luke 14:25-33. A 'disciple' is someone totally committed to Him.

I wish to emphasize again that absolute surrender is the key to spiritual growth. Without such a surrender the believer remains a spiritual child and grows slowly (if at all). The surrender, which needs to be renewed each day, allows the Holy Spirit to work freely in his life and then his growth can be rapid. Surrender is the key because God respects our volition. This absolute surrender is also the basic condition for the filling and enabling of the Holy Spirit, which we must have if we are really going to reach the lost world.

To enter the relationship of disciple is one thing, to maintain it in practice is another. It is not at all automatic. Not even the 'baptism in the Spirit' guarantees it. We have already talked about taking up the cross daily and the living sacrifice. It is completely necessary to renew **each day** our determination to embrace the will of God in everything. It is an attitude that needs renewing every hour, as often as necessary. Now then, to write these words is easy, but to do it is something else again! The daily struggle of the disciple lies just there, to maintain the relationship. The fact is that we need help. One of the main benefits of sharing discipleship with others is the example and stimulus that the participants receive mutually. The sharing contains an element of accountability that helps. When we 'tell it like it is' the others can intercede for us in a specific way—another crucial help. To be a disciple all by yourself is possible, but it is difficult. However, aside from the benefits of sharing there is an indispensable ingredient to discipleship.

In John 8:31 Jesus said to those who had believed in Him: "If you continue in my word you are really my disciples." And if you do not "continue"? (And how can you "continue" in the Word if it does not exist, in your language?) 2 Timothy 3:16-17 reads like this: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is profitable for instruction, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly equipped for every good work." A man of God who is "perfect and thoroughly equipped" is presumably a disciple who is taking the relationship seriously. The phrase "so that" indicates that it is the use of the Scriptures that leads us to the stated result. 1 Peter 2:2 teaches us that the Word is our food; we need it like a baby needs milk. Psalm 1:2-3 is clear to the effect that our spiritual health depends on the "Law of the Lord"; it is our spiritual water, which we need every day. In fact, we need to meditate upon it. In Joshua 1:8 it is God Himself who tells Joshua to meditate upon the book of the Law, and promises the following result: "then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have good success." In short, **it is impossible to be a disciple of Christ without effective access to God's Word.**

Once again I am being radical; by 'be a disciple' I mean the maintaining of the relationship. But, can it really be necessary to meditate upon the Word every day? Well, there we have several relevant texts, among others. If we are to exhort one another **daily** because of "the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13), how much more should we not look in our "mirror" (James 1:22-25) and expose ourselves to the "Sword of the Spirit" (Hebrews 4:12, Ephesians 6:17) each day?

But how then could the Apostle Paul make disciples, and what about the righteous in the Old Testament? We should remember that Psalm 1:2-3 and Joshua 1:8 (and Deuteronomy 32:47) are from the Old Testament, but I believe that the 'ground rules' change somewhat with the progress of Revelation. We have more than the righteous of the Old Testament, and certainly God will require more of us. For example, the standard of grace is higher than the standard of law. The law required the tithe, grace requires 100% (Luke 14:33). The law required us to love our neighbor as ourselves, grace requires us to love our brother as the Father loves the Son (John 13:34 and 15:9)! And we have the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. I also believe that the age of the Apostles was in some sense transitional. However all that may be, Paul applied himself to write what was 'lacking', complementing the New Testament materials that already existed and that others were producing. As he said good-bye to the Ephesians he stated his philosophy clearly: "I commend you to God and to **the Word of his grace**, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32). I know that although the Biblical standards are presented in absolute terms our practice is not absolute. But there the goal is, and I do not dare to diminish it. Now let us consider the second question.

### ***Make Disciples of Whom?***

To begin, any and every person comes within the realm of Christ's orders and therefore is a legitimate candidate for discipling. Of course. That being granted, however, I would like to return to the command in Matthew 28:19, "make disciples **in all ethnic nations**". Across the centuries and millennia God has demonstrated His concern for the well-being of all the ethnic groups in the world. The first overt statement of this concern is in the Abrahamic Covenant: "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). We can gain some idea of the importance that God attaches to this matter from the unparalleled circumstance that He repeats it four more times, in Genesis 18:18, 22:18, 26:4 and 28:14! Hebrews 6:13-18 explains that when He swore by Himself (see Genesis 22:16-18) God gave the greatest possible guarantee to the declared purpose. **All** the families of the earth **must** be blessed. Both Peter (see Acts 3:25) and Paul (see Galatians 3:8) link the Gospel of Christ to God's promise that He will bless all the families of the earth. In the New Testament several passages reaffirm this divine purpose: Matthew 12:21 and 24:14, Mark 13:10, Luke 2:32 and 24:47; much of Acts and of Paul's ministry in general has to do with the nations. Revelation 5:9 (where every extant Greek manuscript except one reads: "have bought **us** for God with your blood out of every tribe and language and people and ethnic nation"), 7:9 and 14:6 are emphatic, not to mention Revelation 22:2.

So then, the Lord Jesus wants disciples in each ethnic nation or 'family'. In the first chapter we saw that there are at least 6,000 such nations in the world. And many of them still do not have an ambassador of Christ. Worse yet, two thirds of the languages of the world still do not have so much as a verse of Scripture. As we have already argued, without the Word it is impossible to maintain the relationship of disciple. That means that at this writing we are unable to make disciples in 4,000 ethnic nations! How can we tolerate such a situation?

When we speak of 2,000 ethnic nations without ambassador, or 4,000 ethnic nations without Scripture, we need to clarify something. The unreached peoples are minority groups. Although most of those groups number in the thousands and tens of thousands (and even hundreds of thousands), there are ethnic nations with less than a thousand people. In Australia and Brazil there are numerous groups that are quite small, sometimes less than a hundred people. At this point a logical query comes to mind. Is it worth the bother to try to reach such a group? Can we justify the expense in time, money and personnel? (Keep in mind that pioneer transcultural work is at least ten times more difficult than doing evangelism in your own language and culture—it usually takes years to achieve a disciple.)

Does size matter? Did Jesus command us to make disciples only in groups of over a thousand people, or ten thousand? Did Jesus not tell us to preach to each person? (An ethnic nation reduced to a sole survivor still falls within the scope of that order.) Here I wish to ask some apparently silly questions. Did anyone choose who would be his father or mother, where he would be born, to what culture he would belong? I did not choose to be born to parents who were followers of Jesus Christ, to a language that has had the Bible for centuries, within a culture that permitted me to choose whatever occupation the present world offered. I did not choose it, nor did I deserve it; God just gave it to me. By the same token, not a single Catauixi Indian (there are less than 100) chose to be born in the middle of the Amazon jungle, to a people decimated, despised, exploited and almost finished, to a

language that has yet to be written, within a culture that condemns him to die in the jungle without any knowledge of the Gospel and after a life of struggle with evil spirits and the 'green hell' (whoever called the jungle a green hell must have been there once). He did not choose either.

Now, I would like you to consider all that Jesus means in your life, both here and hereafter. Ready? Now I am going to ask you to exercise your imagination. Try to imagine that you do not have any of that, that all of a sudden you changed places with a Catauixi and it is you who are in that jungle without Christ, without hope and without escape, and he is the one who is here. In such an event would you not wish that someone would think it worth the bother to go to you with the light of the Gospel?

Having said that, I wish to make it very clear that I am not here to make a merely emotional appeal. I do not want everyone to take off for the jungle in search of an unreached 'Indian'. In fact, I would even say, "Don't go!", unless you are sure that is God's will for your life. Transcultural work is very hard and should not be attempted on the basis of an emotional appeal, nor because of a romantic idea—rather it should be based on an unshakable certainty as to God's specific will for your life. There is no emotion or romantic idea that can stand up to the rude reality.

People, we must take seriously the challenge of the unreached ethnic nations. But as soon as we do we will be confronted by several implications. Before considering them let us take up the third question.

### ***How does one Make Disciples?***

The first step is to be a disciple. Bear in mind what has already been offered on this subject. The rest is summed up in Matthew 28:20, "teaching them to keep everything that I have commanded you". To disciple involves **teaching**. Teaching what? Teaching to "keep", that is **obey**. Obey what? Obey **everything** that Jesus commanded. Since we cannot obey rules that we do not know about, it is necessary to start by teaching the commands—like Paul did, teaching "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

Do you suppose that is what happens in most of our churches? Is it not mainly evangelistic messages that one hears? But evangelistic preaching is virtually useless for a believer. What is he supposed to do, get saved all over again every Sunday? Here is a believer who has gone to church every Sunday for twenty years; next week he goes again and what does he hear? For the thousandth time he hears how to be saved. But he is already saved. That message is of no use to him; he came in hungry and goes out the same way. What a tragedy! Goat food is no good for sheep! (I am using the metaphors we find in Matthew 25:33.) In spite of that, if there are 300 sheep and three goats in a church service, you guessed it! The preaching is aimed at the three goats. If there are 300 sheep and no goats—the preaching is for the goats that are not there! Is that not the way it is? My dear friends, **goat food is no good for sheep**. However, sheep food is also good for goats. If the preacher serves up a delicious three course dinner any goats present just may decide that they would like to eat too! Don't you think? But the main thing is that the sheep be well fed. After all, the objective is to make disciples, and that is the emphasis that should predominate in our church services.

Up to here I have presupposed that the Bible is available in the language of the people. In order to teach the Scriptures they must exist. When Jesus said in John 8:31, "if you continue in my word you are really my disciples", of necessity He was presupposing the existence of that Word. How can you remain in something that does not exist? The point is, it must exist **for the person**; the individual must have effective access to the Word. So, if God sends you to one of the 4,000 ethnic nations that are completely without Scripture, how are you going to proceed?

Even if you think that all you need to do is evangelize, how can you speak with authority if there is no Scripture in their language? Would you not be forgetting the truth expressed in Romans 10:17? "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the **Word of God**." But if you win a few converts even so, where is the food for those newborn babies? How are they going to become disciples? If someone does not furnish God's Word in that language those new believers will be condemned to perpetual babyhood. Is that what you want, to condemn a people to perpetual babyhood? God forbid!

Among Christ's commands there is not any that tells us to translate the Bible. But there is the Great Commission that tells us to make disciples, and if we understand that it is impossible to be a disciple

of His without effective access to His Word then furnishing that Word becomes a logical necessity. We cannot fulfill the Great Commission with reference to the 4,000 Bibleless tribes until someone translates the necessary Scripture into their languages.

Where the Bible exists but there are illiterate believers, we need to set up literacy courses in our churches so that each one will be able to meditate upon the Word at home. I believe there is a close analogy between the physical and spiritual realms in the area of nutrition. Can you imagine eating only on Sundays? Who could survive physically on that basis? Can they be healthy and strong? A believer who can read and has a Bible goes hungry because he chooses to—he could read and meditate upon the Word at home. An illiterate believer is stuck, unless someone reads to him out loud, personally or via a recording. But in that event how can he **study** the Word and meditate upon it at his own convenience? It seems clear to me that the best option is to help people to learn how to read for themselves, whenever possible. I know that some missiologists will disagree with the emphasis I am giving to literacy and reading, especially with reference to peoples whose languages were unwritten until recently and who are used to doing all communication orally. I respect their right to disagree but for all the reasons already given I maintain the position herein presented. Let us work at enabling and encouraging everyone to meditate upon the Word at home, daily.

When it comes to transcultural work, I believe that we will succeed in making disciples only if we respect the language and culture of the people—like Jesus did. He incarnated Himself in the language and culture of the Jews of that time (John 1:14). On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit respected the mother tongue of each person present to the extent that He worked a miracle to guarantee that each one heard the message in his own language (Acts 2:4-11). As long as a missionary does not embrace the language and culture of the people, and (more important still) as long as the Word of God does not exist in that language, the Gospel is condemned to remain something foreign, something on the outside. Should not every ambassador of Christ be concerned to make his ministry as efficient as possible?

It is not difficult to encounter those who do a lot of their ministering by means of interpreters. But I ask you to reflect on the following question: is it possible to make disciples through an interpreter? Whoever uses an interpreter has no way of verifying or rectifying the alterations that he will **invariably** introduce. Invariably. When the interpreter is a servant of Christ, is familiar with the content of the message and is completely bilingual then the communication has a reasonable chance of being adequate (although seldom as good as if the speaker controlled the language of his audience). But even with such an interpreter, if the missionary tries to disciple someone will it not actually be the interpreter who does the work? Now then, when the interpreter is not even converted the message will most certainly be distorted, often to the point of being unrecognizable. The interpreter will filter the message through his own worldview, inescapably, maybe even unconsciously. If the missionary could understand what the interpreter was really saying he would be horrified and consternated. I doubt that you can make disciples through an interpreter.

And be careful with bilingualism. Many missionaries content themselves with using a trade language even when dealing with people whose mother tongue is different. I suspect that only infrequently will one succeed in making a **disciple** through a second language (not the candidate's mother tongue), no matter how bilingual the person seems to be (to buy and sell and talk about the weather he may be fluent in the trade language), because the spiritual life of a person is almost always mediated through the mother tongue. Here I could cite various examples from my own experience. When someone is so bilingual that he virtually has two mother tongues (so to speak), or if he has reached the university level in the second language, then that second language may be adequate—in that event he will have reached the point of being able to handle abstract and philosophical ideas in that language. But such individuals are comparatively few among the 350 million people who make up the 4,000 ethnic nations that lack God's Word. Surely we should elaborate our plans and strategies so as to handle the main challenge, not the exceptions. Watch out for bilingualism!

In short, whoever takes on a transcultural work should exert himself to really learn the language and culture of the people to which he has been sent. If there is no Scripture in the language he should make sure that it becomes available. Where the Bible exists we should encourage its use, by all means. In other words, we must teach them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. And we must give the example, because in order to make disciples we ourselves must **be** disciples. A variety of ministries have prepared detailed material and instructions on discipleship. These may be obtained from any evangelical bookstore.

## Implications

In closing this chapter I would like to comment on some of its implications. First, your understanding of this command and strategy of Christ will determine your procedure, the way you go about your work, of necessity. If someone wishes to build a shanty, he will use appropriate materials and procedure. If someone else wishes to build a twenty-story building, the procedure and materials must be quite different. It is evident that not everyone is competent to build a skyscraper—it requires adequate training. Likewise, not everyone is competent to feed the sheep. When a pastor works eight hours a day in a secular activity will he have the time and energy to fix good meals? It seems to me that this question needs to be studied. If we are going to take the discipleship strategy seriously we may well find it necessary to modify our lifestyle. To make disciples is one thing; to merely win souls is another.

Please, do not misunderstand me! I am not against winning souls; I am not against evangelism. Obviously we must win souls—you cannot grow up until you are born! We run into difficulties when that is all we do, when we do not rear our children. Nor am I belittling the gift of an evangelist. If you have this gift, thanks be to God! I would only like to suggest that as you exercise your gift you take care not to leave a trail of abandoned children. You should team up with those who have the gift of teaching so that together you may do a better job.

When I emphasize the 2,000 unreached ethnic nations, or the 4,000 languages without a verse of Scripture, it is not to suggest that everyone should try to go to another people, absolutely not. I imagine that if every believer were equally available to God He would not send more than 10% to other nations. In the first place, transcultural work is very difficult and not everyone has the capacity to do it. In the second place, someone has to stay and make disciples around here. In the third place, pioneer transcultural work is a full time job and the laborers who take it on will need full financial support—someone has to work to produce that support. Not everyone should 'go', but everyone is obligated by Christ's Great Commission. We all must intercede, give, inform and encourage. All that we do should be on behalf of Christ's Kingdom here on earth.

Again I say, not everyone should do transcultural work, but **everyone should be a disciple and make disciples**, each in the place and capacity that God may determine. I understand that Jesus wants His disciples operating in all honest areas and professions of our society—being and making. Anyone can put on the mask of a 'saint' at church, on Sundays, but to reflect God's character in the market place during the week, that is another story. The homemaker disciplines her own children, and then the women and children in her neighborhood. Teachers and students make disciples at school. Carpenters, truckers, lawyers, bankers, merchants, politicians, etc., etc., each one being a disciple and making disciples in his own sphere. I suppose that is the best way to do our evangelizing. Instead of taking a 'goat' to church to be evangelized we should win him first and then take the new 'lamb' to church to be fed and disciplined (as a supplement to our own efforts). I believe that the ministry of the Word in our churches should be for the benefit of the sheep!

To conclude, Christ's command and strategy is to make disciples, not just win souls. Children don't work; they make work! On the basis of all we have seen, I say again that it is indispensable that the missionary candidate be a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ. Otherwise he is sure to fail. But even more important, if possible, is the following area: he must know how to conduct spiritual warfare, so to that we now turn ("Liberate people from the power of Satan").

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