

Between Conversion and Commissioning?

Matthew 28:16-20 (all versions of GC; Mt 4:18-22; Col 1:

30.9.10

John Ortberg tells the story of Denny. Denny was in John's church. He had attended church his whole life but was not happy man. He was perpetually negative. Everyone expected him to be negative and his face showed it. When John Ortberg tried to introduce some contemporary music into the church service – nothing radical, just more contemporary music - Denny began complaining that the music was too loud.

John tried to explain to him that the church wanted to reach people in the community who didn't know Jesus and wanted to remove one of the cultural barriers that stopped people coming into the church. Denny just responded, "The music is too loud." He was just a grumpy man.

Then he started talking to other staff, the ushers, even strangers in the foyer saying, "Don't you think the music is too loud?" The staff realised they had to deal with it and thought they had, until, one day, an official from the equivalent of OSH turned up because of a noise complaint against the church. The OSH man felt embarrassed about busting a church. They laughed about it. It came to nothing.

But who had filed the complaint? Denny, of course.

John Ortberg's observation on the entire affair is telling. He says, "Denny is not changing. He is a cranky guy. He has been cranky his whole life. Not just about the church – he does not effectively know how to love his wife, his children cannot relate to him and he has no joy. He's been going to church his whole life – sixty years. And nobody is surprised. Nobody in the church is surprised that he stays cranky year after year. No one is particularly bothered by it. It is as if we expect it – that's just Denny. Nobody is expecting him to be more like Jesus year after year."

My guess is that most of us have people like Denny in our churches. Or people who display other signs of bad behaviour. We just accept that that is how people are. But that is not what Jesus intended.

I am really sorry if this is kindergarten stuff for you but I fear at times that we have lost sight of our primary calling. To put it bluntly, I think we have largely forgotten what Jesus intended.

Each of the four gospels finishes with the Great Commission. Let's hear them all.

Ron Peterson will read...

Matt 28:16-20 ¹⁶Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Mark 16:15-16 ¹⁵He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. ¹⁶Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Luke 24:46-49 ⁴⁶He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to

all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

*John 20:21-23 ²¹Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."
²²And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."*

Each of the gospels concludes with this commissioning of His followers. We have to conclude that this is important. As Jesus' mission ended, He defined the mission of His followers. This is our mission.

The story of the early church in Acts begins with the Great Commission.

Acts 1:8 ... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

In Acts we see the church doing what it had been commanded by Jesus to do – making disciples.

If it wasn't enough that each of the gospels ends with this charge to mission and the story of the early church starts with it, Jesus was equally clear about it when He began His ministry of making disciples.

Alison McKenzie will read Matthew 4:18-22, Mark 3:13-15

Matt 4:18-22 ¹⁸As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of people." ²⁰At once they left their nets and followed him.

²¹Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, ²²and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

When He began His ministry and called these men, Jesus was very clear about what the end result would be: I will make you fishers of people. What were they to become? Evangelists and disciple-makers.

Again, when He chose the Twelve,
Mark 3:14 ¹³Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. ¹⁴He appointed twelve—designating them apostles—that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach ¹⁵and to have authority to drive out demons.

He appointed them "to be with Him... that He might send them out." The intention from the beginning was to send them out. He was about making missionaries.

When people join our churches, do we say, "It is great to have you as part of our church. You know, our purpose is to make missionaries. You become part of us; we will train you to be sent out"? It might be debatable when the Twelve were converted but if we see their agreeing to follow Jesus as their conversion, then at the point of their conversion, Jesus was already talking about their commissioning. Those two events are watershed events in a Christian's life: conversion and commissioning. For Jesus, at the point of conversion, the intention is commissioning. What happens between conversion and commissioning?

These five versions of the Great Commission are all a bit different but if we consider them all together, there is one single thrust: It is all about preaching the gospel of forgiveness to all nations in the power of the Holy Spirit and then training the converts to follow Jesus.

Matthew calls that “making disciples”. We have heard the Matthew passage preached on dozens of times. One problem is that that is often in the context of a missions service. It is about what happens overseas.

In the Commission there are four verbs: Go, make disciples, baptise and teach to obey. Grammatically, one is the main verb and the other three are participles, or supporting verbs.

When I ask people which they think is the main verb, the answer is often “Go”. That is what we hear preached. In fact, “go” is not the main verb. The main verb is “make disciples”. That is not about what is done overseas. That is our mission. Our mission is to make disciples. The participles tell us how to do it.

We are to make disciples by going, which means getting off our backsides and out of our comfort zones, taking the initiative to go to people. Literally, “go” means “as you go”. In other words, as we go through life, in all we do, we are to make disciples.

We are to make disciples by baptising them which is about bringing them to faith. The first phase is evangelism. It means sharing the good news of Jesus, seeing people converted and celebrating that new faith through baptism. The first half of the Great Commission is about conversion. If we are going to do what we have been commissioned to do, we have to be very intentional about seeking conversions – people coming to a faith in Jesus Christ.

But Jesus didn’t stop there. We are to make disciples by teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded. The disciple-making process doesn’t stop when someone is converted. Jesus talked about then intentionally training Christians to obey all of Jesus’ teaching. He didn’t say, “Teach them everything I have commanded.” He said, “Teach them *to obey* everything I have commanded.”

What would that look like? Can you imagine whole churches of people actively learning to obeying everything Jesus commanded? They would love God with all their hearts, souls, minds and strength. They would love each other. Imagine if we had lots of people who knew how to turn the other cheek.

The reality is often that we have churches full of Dennys; people who are self-centred, when Jesus said we can’t even be disciples without dying to ourselves. People who are still spiritual babies.

This is what happens between conversion and commissioning: coaching.

In the Great Commission, Jesus command conversion then coaching. Bringing people to faith in Jesus Christ then bringing people to maturity in Jesus Christ. This is our mission.

Of course, if disciples are to obey everything Jesus commanded, that includes this command to make disciples. And so disciples are to become disciple-makers. It is a cyclic process analogous to parents who raise children to become parents who can raise children. Or, the master craftsman who trains an apprentice to the point where he/she can become a master and train another generation of apprentices. Disciples are to be coached to be disciple makers. The sequence is conversion, coaching, commissioning.

For the apostles, that was exactly how it was. They were called to follow, then they were trained, then they were commissioned. The disciples became disciple-makers.

That is why our theme doesn’t simply talk about making disciples. It talks about making disciple-making disciples: growing people to the point where they make disciples.

Think about those three words: conversion, coaching, commissioning. Is your church intentional about each of them? How focused is your church on evangelism? What strategies does your church have in place for coaching; for training people to obey everything Jesus commanded? At the point of conversion are you already talking about commissioning? It is about training people for ministry. The gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor and teacher are given “to equip God’s people for works of service”. The

objective is followers of Christ who are converted, then coached, then commissioned. That is what happened in the New Testament. That is what disciple-making is all about. That is our mission.

I remember the first two sentences in my first third form Latin text book: *Discipuli picturam spectate. Britannia insula est.* Pupils, look at the picture. Britain is an island.

The English word “disciple” is derived from that Latin word “discipulus” (plural, *discipuli*). It simply means a pupil, a student. It translates the New Testament Greek word “*mathetes*” which also means a pupil or a student - except that, in the New Testament, disciples are always disciples of someone. John the Baptist had disciples; the Pharisees; rabbis; Jesus. The philosophy was not so much that the disciple learned facts from the teacher but that the disciple became like the teacher. It was not about information but about imitation. It was about gaining knowledge, yes, but also about developing skills and growing in character – to become like the teacher.

In Matthew 10:24 Jesus said, *“The disciple is not above his teacher, nor the servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master.”*

The goal was for the disciple to become like his teacher. The disciple was not just a student but a follower. We should recognise that word. Jesus called people to follow Him. The follower is someone who attaches himself/herself to a particular leader wanting to be like that leader. It is that “being like Jesus” that he summed up in the words “obeying everything I have commanded.” Living like Jesus; thinking like Jesus; doing what Jesus did; having the mind of Christ; having the character of Christ.

This is our mission: making followers of Jesus, or students of Jesus, who are becoming like Jesus.

Jesus set the discipleship bar very high. He said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”* (Luke 9:23-24) There were no exceptions. Anyone who would come after Jesus must lay down his/her life. We should say the same to people who want to join our churches.

In Luke 14:25-27 we are told, *“Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them He said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”*

There is no discipleship without that. People who don’t do these things cannot be disciples. We have drifted a long way from that sort of aspiration; that sort of self-denying followership. We are meant to be making disciples love Jesus above everything, including their own families and even their own lives. We are not doing it. The best thing we can do for our towns and cities and country is produce citizens who are increasingly like Jesus. Just imagine what our communities would be like. This is our mission.

It is a huge ask and yet Jesus said, “I will make you fishers of people.” He is still in the business of making missionaries. He can do in people’s lives what we can’t. He doesn’t expect instant maturity. The Twelve shows were frustratingly slow to grow, and yet those men became world-changers. Jesus did make them fishers of people. A disciple is a student, a learner; not instantly perfect but a student of Jesus Christ and becoming like Him.

My prayer is that we will be convicted that this is what we are called to. I pray that we might know beyond all doubt that it can be done. God is still in the business of making disciple-making disciples. This is on His heart. If we say yes to being disciples who make disciples, God will enable us for that. He will be so excited that we are doing what we have been commissioned to do. That church will grow. That’s my prophecy because you know what? Jesus said, “Go, make disciples, baptising them and teaching them to obey... and surely I will be with you to the very end of the age.” Do this and I will be with you.

Apart from His sacrificial work on the cross, the most significant thing our Lord did upon earth was to make disciples. He relied on having 11 trained disciples. It was the basis for the spread of His movement. The scary thing is that disciple-making is still the basis for the spread of His movement.

The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand is in terminal decline. But what if we listened to Jesus' last words and we said "Yes, Lord"? What if we committed ourselves to seeing people converted, then coached and then commissioned? Might we see a miracle? Might we experience God's blessing?