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8/2/2009

Niagra Bible Conference - Sunday Evening Sermon
The Great Commission
Matthew 28:16-20

In 2 Peter 3, the Apostle noted to those he was writing that his purpose was to stir up their sincere minds by way of reminder. That is essentially my purpose as well, though perhaps I might give you a slightly different view and hopefully some good practical applications to the Biblical passages and principles we will be looking at in our sessions together this week.

I want to begin tonight by laying the foundation for the importance of discipleship by examining the command Jesus gave His disciples before His ascension. Please turn to the passage we often refer to as the Great Commission - Matthew 28:16-20

16 But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. 17 And when they saw Him, they worshiped [Him]; but some were doubtful. 18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. "

We are all familiar with this passage with many of you even teaching or preaching on it. Sometimes familiarity with a passage can result in taking it for granted and then failing to recognize or remember its importance. The Great Commission is crucial to our understanding of the purpose of the church and in setting the priorities with in the ministries of that church.

Let's begin by **setting the context**.

By the time this event occurs, Jesus has spent three years teaching His disciples about the kingdom of heaven and preparing them for ministry. Jesus has been crucified, buried and risen from the dead. This particular event occurs during the forty days of post-resurrection appearances during which Jesus gave them many convincing proofs and spoke concerning the kingdom of God in preparing them for the ministry they would have in being His witness following His ascension (Acts 1:3-8). They would begin in Jerusalem and work their way outward to Judea, Samaria and then uttermost parts of the world - the lands of the Gentiles.

The first thing we note in this passage is that there are three things necessary for the Christian to be able to carry out the Great Commission. All three are also foundational in being a Christian. They are availability, worship & obedience.

Availability: Jesus told the eleven disciples to meet Him in Galilee. They would not be bothered there like they would in Jerusalem where the religious leaders opposed them. In addition, Jesus had a large number followers in that region and this would have given them easier access to Jesus. Paul points out in 1 Cor. 15:6 that over 500 of Jesus' followers saw Him at one time. The disciples have followed Jesus' instructions and are now in Galilee. The first requirement to being used by God is that you must be available.

None of these men were great prizes at this point, for all of them except John had run

away when Jesus was arrested, and they had stayed hidden. None of these men were noted for great faith either. Jesus even called them “men of little faith” three times in the book of Matthew (8:26; 14:31 & 16:8). Though Jesus had been telling them since they had left Tyre and started on their journey to Jerusalem, all of them had also missed Jesus' point that He would suffer in Jerusalem and then be raised from the dead. These were just ordinary men complete with all of a man's failures. They often selfish & proud, failing to understand the obvious, boastful and yet proving to be weak and afraid in the area of boasting. They were ordinary men, but they made themselves available and God worked with them and turned them into men that later "turned the world upside down" as reported by their opponents in Acts 17:6.

In order to be used by God you must first make yourself available. To see God work in your church and community you must be willing to set aside what you want in order to go and do what He wants.

This point is well understood by most of you which is why you missions and pastoral ministry. However, even so, that does not always mean you are available. The disciples had already shown their commitment to be followers of Jesus, but their fear had made them unwilling to risk the dangers that arose with Jesus' crucifixion. They had to face their fears and be willing to be obedient to Jesus once again in order to be available. We must do the same. Availability is a continual action of placing my will in submission to His will and going and doing whatever my Lord desires. I may not always like the next assignment the Lord gives.

Worship: Next, we find in verse 17 that when they saw Jesus they fell down and worshiped Him. Worship is to be the heartbeat of the Christian. The Father seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and truth (John 4:23-24).

The statement that some were doubtful does not refer to the eleven, for doubt would have resulted in hesitation in their worship of the Lord. That had been the case with Thomas until after he had seen the resurrected Jesus. With the doubts removed there was no hesitation in worship and he exclaimed "*My Lord and my God!*" (John 20:28). Those who were doubtful refers to those in the crowd that were unsure if it really was true that Jesus was alive. Remember that the eleven disciples had been unsure, so it certainly is no surprise that some in the crowd are doubtful. They had come to find out if it was really true. (Note that Matthew's inclusion of this demonstrates the veracity of what he is saying. If the resurrection had been a hoax, no one trying to promote it would have said anything that would have cast uncertainty on their case).

Jesus was able to place the responsibility of this commission upon the disciples because they believed in Him and were committed to Him as demonstrated by their worship of Him. Worship of the Lord comes before serving Him.

Obedience: The third element needed to serve Christ is obedience. In verse 18 we find that Jesus comes up and begins to speak. His coming close and speaking would help to remove the doubts of those present. Jesus said two things that demonstrate the necessity of obeying Him. First, what He says about Himself, and second, the command He gives.

Jesus said that "*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.*" Jesus' claim here is unlimited. Authority refers to Jesus' right, power and freedom to do as He pleases and command others to do as He pleases. Jesus' claim here is that this authority has been given to Him by the Father and that it encompasses everything. The word, "*all,*" and the phrase, "*heaven and earth,*" reinforce each other in expressing the idea that Jesus

has authority over all created things.

It is Jesus' right to command us. It is our responsibility to obey. Failure to obey subjects us to either His chastisement (Heb. 12), forced obedience (Eph 4) or His wrath (Rom. 1, Rev. 20). Jesus has the authority to command and he does so in verse 19.

It is important to stress that Jesus is giving a command, not making a suggestion. It is expected that those that belong to Christ will obey this command. It is ludicrous for someone to say that they believe Jesus' claims and trust Him for salvation and then reject what He says and not submit to His authority. That only proves they do not believe Jesus' claims about Himself, and one of His claims is authority over all creation.

This command is not arbitrary but is based on Jesus Himself. Notice the command begins with a "therefore" which brings back into focus Jesus' authority. The command to make disciples can be fulfilled because Jesus has the authority to send us and the power to accomplish His work through us. Again, it is not your ability, it is your availability given in worshipful submission that enables you to be used by God. Jesus will accomplish His work through you. Since Jesus is who He claims to be, you are therefore to go out and do what He commands. In obedience to Him you can rest on His power and see God's hand at work.

Availability, worship & obedience will allow you to carry out the commission Jesus has given to His followers to make disciples.

The Command: Make Disciples

This command in verse 19 & 20 is one command accomplished in three elements. The Greek grammar here is one verb, μαθητεύσατε - "make disciples," with three participles: πορευθεντες - "going," , βαπτίζοντες - "baptizing," & διδάσκοντες - "teaching." We are to "make disciples" by "going," "baptizing" and "teaching."

The command itself is to make disciples of all nations. Whatever else the church does, the center of its focus must be to make disciples. Our outreaches, our fellowship, our various ministries, and even our worship are all to revolve around being and making disciples. If anything else is the focus of the church, then that church is in disobedience to Christ. Tragically, this is the major failure of most churches not only in America, but around the world. Churches are doing many things which may be good and helpful, but when a church fails to make disciples of Jesus Christ, then it fails regardless of anything else it does.

May I suggest to you that the foundational reason that the United States is in the sad moral state that it is in is because generations of Christians have played church instead of making disciples of Christ, and that is true even of their own children. The myriad of social services started and performed by churches, the large facility complexes and even the ability to attract large numbers of non-Christians to its ministries is nice, but of no eternal value if the people are not becoming conformed to the image of Christ. The church in America continues to shrink as a percentage of the population, with many denominations that were strong witness of Christ 100 years ago also shrinking in actual numbers. Even worse, those attending those churches vary little in their moral beliefs and actions from those who are not professing Christians. Their manner of life makes it very difficult to distinguish many professing Christians from non-Christians. That brings us to a very important question

What is a disciple? If Jesus' command is to make disciples, then what exactly is a disciple. A disciple is simply someone who follows the teachings of another. They learn

from the teacher. They identify with the teacher. They seek to be like the teacher. Luke 6:40 gives a good description saying that the *"disciple is not above his teacher . . . but after being fully trained will be like his teacher."* Paul tells us in Romans 8:29 that all those that will be saved are *"predestined to be conformed to the image of [Jesus]."*

You can see from this that if you claim to be a Christian, then being a disciple of Christ is not an option. Even the term, "Christian," speaks of discipleship since Acts 11:26 states it was the "disciples" that were first called "Christians" in Antioch. The term Christian itself means to be "a little Christ." A true Christian is someone who, as Paul describes in Gal. 2, has died to themselves and has Christ living in and through them. Others should see Christ living through all those who claim to be Christians. The most common Biblical designation for those saved by God's grace through faith in the Lord Jesus is disciple. (μαθητας occurs 250 times - 29 times in Acts alone. "Believer" - 10 times "Christian" only occurs 3 times).

Jesus command is to make disciples of Him of all nations and you cannot do that unless you are His disciple first. We make disciples of Christ the same way that the apostle Paul did in 1 Cor. 11:1 - *"be imitators of me just as I also am of Christ."* We call people to follow us as we follow Christ. If other people became like you, would they also be becoming like Christ? That, in a nut shell, is what making a disciple is all about. People begin to pattern their life after you, and since your life is patterned after Jesus, they in turn are also becoming like Christ.

Jesus commanded us to "make disciples" and gave three elements needed to accomplish that. First is the going out. Second is baptizing them. Third is teaching them to observe all His commandments. We are going to look at each of these in more detail.

Going

The first aspect of making a disciple is to go, and notice that Jesus is telling His disciples that they are the ones to go. We have a sign above the door of our meeting place as you exit that says, *"You are now entering the mission field"* to reflect this great truth of the first aspect of making disciples. Christians are to go out to the non-believers in order to start the process of making them into disciples of Christ. We are the ones that must make the effort, be inconvenienced, go to places that make us uncomfortable and expend our time, money and energy in the endeavor.

Evangelize. The first step in making a disciple is to go out and evangelize. It is telling people the good news of Jesus Christ and salvation of sin through faith in Him. That is the command of Mark 16:15 to *"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation."* The gospel is the message that is to be proclaimed as we go out to make disciples. This is where the first major error has entered into the church.

First, many churches no longer evangelize. They have become religious clubs of various sorts. Some are private social societies. Others have become social service organizations sort of like Kiwanis or Rotary. They abandoned the Bible a long time ago so the only good news they have to proclaim is that you would be really cool if you were part of their group, and they can help you be a nicer person. It is a major reason for the sickness and death of many churches. It is a major reason that organizations such as AMOC with their missionaries are so badly needed to revitalize sick churches and make them healthy and replant churches where they have died.

Second, the gospel message of even most evangelical churches has been perverted into saving people from something other than from sin to become righteous followers of

Jesus Christ. This has resulted in a gospel message which avoids mention of sin and repentance, and / or equates being a Christian only with a professed belief instead of being a disciple.

Luke 19:10 records Jesus' wonderful statement that He came to *"seek and to save that which was lost."* However, man centered theology has distorted the meaning of this into being rescued from an unsatisfactory life to a wonderful life. The most often used tract of our time begins by stating *that "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."* True, God does love you and He does have a wonderful plan for your life, but it is wonderful according to His definition, not the definition of the sinner who needs the gospel. That "wonderful" life according to Jesus will include being hated by the world (John 15:19) resulting in persecution and false accusations against you because of your relationship to Jesus (Matt. 5:11,12 etc.). Paul told Timothy that all that strive to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Tim. 3:12).

In order for the church to fulfill her God given purpose she must be making disciples, and in order to make a disciple of Christ you must begin with proclaiming the true gospel. Salvation is not man centered, it is God centered. It is God calling people out of darkness and into His marvelous light to become be His people (1 Peter 2:9-10). It is Jesus Christ paying the price of redemption by His sacrificial substitutionary death on the cross to atone for our sins that we may be forgiven (Colossians 1:13-14) and then justified by His grace through faith in Him (Romans 3:24,28). The Holy Spirit is then given to us to teach us, guide us, and empower us so that we might live to the praise of His glory

The purpose of salvation also emphasizes that it is about God changing us so that we might glorify Him. Ephesians 1:4 states that God *"chose us in Him [Jesus] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him."* Romans 8:28 & 29 says that we were called, foreknown and predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son. 2 Timothy 1:9 tells us that we were called with a holy calling according to His own purpose and grace. 1 Thessalonians 4:7 says we were called for the purpose of sanctification. Jesus said in John 15:16, *"You did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit, and [that] your fruit should remain."* Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-10 that not only were we saved by God's grace through faith, but that *"we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* Salvation includes escape from the punishment of Hell and God's wrath as the simple result of being saved from sin, but salvation from Hell is not its purpose. We must get the gospel right, and when we remember that evangelizing is simply the first step in making a disciple of Christ, we are less prone to perverting it with a substitute message.

Another common error in churches is equating the church with its facilities. The church is not a building. The church is the congregation of people God has called out for Himself to be His people and carry out His work. You are the church and you do the work. A building can only provide a place to meet and store stuff. It cannot make a disciple. You are the body of Christ and only you can fulfill Jesus' command to go and make disciples.

How does this error reveal itself? The most common is in their outreach efforts that reach out to pull in instead of going out to make disciples. What is the difference? Reaching out to pull in is about getting more people so that the facilities can expand or at least be fully used. Special activities are planned so that the congregation can invite their friends and neighbors to come with them to the church facilities. The success of the activity is then gauged in how many people came. Those who go out to make disciples

will also be happy if more people are joining them at the church facilities for worship and other ministries. They are also glad when a non-Christian comes to hear the gospel in a large meeting, but they judge success by the opportunities to personally witness of Christ to someone else. They are successful if they are able to talk to someone about Jesus whether that person comes to the church facilities or not.

Jesus' Example of Evangelism. The emphasis in making disciples is also seen in how Jesus proclaimed Himself to others, and Jesus would be a failure by the standards of most modern evangelists. They would like His use of miracles and healing to draw a crowd, but they would reject His message of "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" They would balk at His handling of Nicodemus in John 3 since Jesus simply laid out the truth and answers his questions by giving both the good and the bad. Jesus let Nicodemus wrestle with the ramifications in his own life of whether he would believe and receive eternal life or continue in unbelief and God's judgement. We find out at the end of the book that Nicodemus did come to believe, but we don't know when. Modern evangelists would also question by Jesus' dealing with the woman at the well in John 4. They would like how He gained her interest and responded to her desire to know more, but being so direct about her having 5 husbands and living with a man who was not her husband and correcting her theology would be too confrontational for them. In John 8 Jesus even called some of those that had said they believed in Him children of Satan (John 8:30-44). They responded by seeking to stone Him. But the example that is most contrary to modern evangelists is our next one. the rich young ruler

The rich young ruler in Mark 10 (see also Matthew 19:16 & Luke 18:18) looked ready for salvation, and what an opening question! Verse 17, "*Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*" You almost want to jump into the text and say, "quick Jesus get this man saved before he gets away. Tell Him to believe in you and have him pray saying that he does so that he is in the kingdom." But what does Jesus do? He challenges him and makes it very difficult for him.

18 And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. 19 "You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" 20 And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." 21 And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." 22 But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property. 23 And Jesus, looking around, ^said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!"

The problem with this man was not his wealth, but his heart. Like many rich people his heart was attached to his wealth. Jesus was not being mean. The text says that Jesus felt a love for the man, but salvation is a matter of the heart and this man's heart was not really on God. Jesus invited him to be a disciple and follow Him, but the young man only wanted to inherit eternal life, and that on his own terms. His wealth was more important to him than knowing and serving the living God.

Jesus' method of evangelism was proclaiming the truth about Himself and calling people to follow Him. Jesus went out to make disciples. The same was true of the apostles. None of them marketed salvation or tried to sell Jesus. They boldly proclaimed the truth about Jesus and salvation. Peter's sermons in Acts 2, 3 & 5 proclaimed Christ and called the people to repentance placing the responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion squarely on those to whom he was speaking. Stephen did the same thing in Acts 7. Paul's

messages throughout Acts were also the same in proclaiming Christ and calling people to repentance from sin.

You can look throughout all the Scriptures, but you will not find a short cut to salvation. The sinner must be reconciled to God by the Savior. Anything less than that results in a false profession by a deceived individual, and that deception can go deep. Remember the warning Jesus gave at the end of the Sermon on the Mount to false teachers. Some of these thought they were serving Christ and even doing miracles in His name, but Jesus would say to them, *"I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness"* (Matthew 7:23).

The first step in making a disciple is going out and proclaiming Jesus Christ to non-believers and calling for them to repent of their sins and place their faith in Christ and follow Him. We must be careful not to bring people into a false profession of faith or give them false assurance. We need to be resourceful in evangelism and find the point of interest that we can use to invite people to learn more of Jesus. We do need to entreat them to respond and be reconciled with God (2 Cor. 5:20), but we also need to make sure that they understand who Jesus is, what it means to believe in Him and the consequences of that. We need to give them room to say no. They do not have to pray with us to get saved.

Missions: Please notice as well in Matthew 28:19 the extent of who we are to reach in going out to make disciples. Jesus we are to make disciples of *"all nations."* Nations here is ἔθνη - ethnic. That also shows the necessity of going out because you cannot make disciples in other nations / ethnic groups if you stay at home and hang around only people who are like you. We have to leave our comfort zone to reach out to people who are different from us. This is cross cultural missions. They will practice customs we do not understand. They may speak another language. They may eat foods we consider unusual. They may have different physical characteristics. They may live nearby or far away in a different land that has a different climate. Whether it is around the block or around the world, the command is for us to go them that we might make them disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because this process of making disciples requires an effort to reach all nations / ethnic groups, it means there cannot be any racial or cultural bias. By that I do not mean any kind of agreement with multiculturalist philosophy that all cultures are equal, for they are not. There are superior and inferior cultures as ranked by a multiplicity of methods. Various ethnic groups do show advantages over other ethnic groups in particular areas. Groups that are very tall will produce more basketball players while groups that are very short will produce more jockeys. Frankly, the multicultural philosophy that dominates our public sector is an evil that is contributing to racial and cultural conflict, not lessening it. However, the Great Commission does mean there is no room for racial or cultural prejudice in the church. What do I mean by that.

The gospel is to go out to all nations and it has broken down the barrier between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:14). The church, Christ's body, is made of people from every nation, tribe, people and tongue (Revelation 7:9). Every ethnic group is in need of the gospel and there will be some from every ethnic group that will respond to it so that the body of Christ is made up of people from every ethnic group. That is true worldwide, it should also be true locally. Local churches reflect the people in the community. Multi-ethnic communities should have multi-ethnic churches.

Second, it also means that every culture, including our own, must bend to follow

Christ. Jesus, not culture, is to determine how the Christian lives. When we evangelize and plant churches it is to be calling people to be followers of Jesus Christ, not instilling in them the culture of our own society. As American society continues its slide downward and away from our Christian heritage, we Christians are finding ourselves as the ones that live counter-culturally.

The apostles started in Jerusalem, the place they were at. Then they expanded to the surrounding regions by going throughout Judea. Next they expanded cross culturally and more distant geographically by going to Samaria, and remember there had been great animosity between the Jews and Samaritans to that point. Finally, they crossed the barrier to reach the Gentiles, whom the Jews generally disdained. Even traveling to distant places to take the gospel to the world in making disciples in all nations. That is the example to follow in your own life. Making disciples starts in your own backyard and progresses outward as God calls you to greater service for Him.

Conclusions

The first aspect then of making disciples is to going. We are to go out to the non-Christian community and proclaim the good news of salvation from sin and reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. We are to proclaim it near and far and everywhere in between. Where exactly you go and how you break open a conversation to proclaim Jesus is only limited by your imagination and willingness to be available.

Tomorrow morning we will look at the second and third aspects of making a disciple which are baptizing them and teaching them to obey Christ's commandments. I want to close this session by jumping to the end of verse 20 to encourage you with Jesus' promise there. *"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

Jesus calls our attention to be alert and focus our minds on what He is now saying by calling out, *"lo."* He then makes it emphatic that He will be with us to the end - a literal translation being, *"I will be with you, even I, all the days even to the conclusion of the age."* That means that Jesus will be with you each and every day of your life even to the conclusion of this age and you are transformed and taken to heaven. Jesus is present. His power is present. His command is given. Evangelism can be scary, but since it is done with Jesus present and all authority is given to Him, then the fear can be overcome and He can and will use us. The only question then is our availability, our worship of Him and our willingness to be obedient to Him.

The Great Commission & Jesus' Model of Evangelism Matthew 28:16-20 & Selected

Context

Three things necessary for the Christian to be able to carry out the great commission:

Availability

Worship

Obedience

The Command: Make Disciples

What is a disciple?

Going - The first step in making a disciple

Evangelize

Church Errors in Evangelism

1)

2)

The Purpose of Salvation:

3)

Jesus' Example of Evangelism

Missions