

INNOVATE CHURCH -DISCIPLESHIP
Chapter Two: *What is God's Will for My Church?*
Discipleship!

Peter and the disciples were huddled together in an upper room in Jerusalem. They were certain about the death of Jesus but now they were uncertain about their future. Jesus told them not to move forward with the mission until they had received the Spirit. They had been praying non-stop for 40 days. Suddenly, they heard a noise. It sounded like a tornado. It was a rushing wind and it blew right into the room where they were praying. Everyone in the room saw “tongues of fire.” They began to speak in languages unknown to them but known to others. Since it was the day of Pentecost thousands of pilgrims from all over the world were in Jerusalem. To their amazement they could miraculously understand the different languages being spoken by the disciples. They were curious as to how this could be happening and they were curious as to what it meant. Finally Peter, the impulsive disciple, gets up and explains that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of the prophet Joel, who said in the last days the Spirit of God would be poured out upon His people.¹ Peter explained that they were all witnesses of a new movement of God in their midst.² The command to take the gospel to the world now seemed like it might be a possibility.

And now Peter does something really amazing. He preaches a message that basically says to all the listeners assembled there, “You killed Jesus.” What boldness. What a transformation! This is the same disciple in the garden, when Jesus was arrested, who denied Jesus three times. The third time he had to emphasize that he did not know the man with a loud curse.³ This is the same person who didn’t want to risk his life when Jesus was arrested. Now he is laying his life on the line for this man that he swore that he didn’t even know. The transformation in Peter was so complete that it is reported in history that Peter was crucified upside down.⁴ Talk about a transformation! The transformation was powerful in the person of Peter, but the transformation did not just affect his character, it affected his entire course of life. Being leads to doing.

Now it’s interesting to note that Jesus chose Peter to bring the first message of the church age. Because it was Jesus and Peter talking in Matthew 16, where we see the first mention of the word “church” uttered by Jesus. The occasion was Peter’s declaration that Jesus was the “anointed one.” In response to Peter’s proclamation Jesus said, “*I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.*”⁵ It almost seems that the conversation between Jesus and Peter in Matthew 16 about the church is not complete until Peter’s sermon in Acts 2. Peter then gets up and preaches the first message and a mob of “called out ones” respond to the invitation and the church age that was foretold in Matthew 16 comes into existence and the conversation comes full circle.

The word “church” simply means a gathering of “called out ones.”⁶ Christians are called out of the world and called to a Savior who calls them to a mission. The church is a fulfillment of the kingdom and the kingdom is a fulfillment of the mission of God and the mission of God springs from His nature and love. John 3:16 says it best, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have eternal life.” God sent His son on a mission to save the world. He

accomplished His mission and now he asks us to finish the mission, “As the father has sent me, I also send you.”⁷ The church exists to win people to Christ, help them grow in their faith and then send them to participate in the mission of winning the entire world. The process of growing them in their faith and sending them is called discipleship and it is God’s will for every church.

Now it has been 2,000 years since the early church began the task of winning and discipling the world and it has faced many challenges. Challenges like persecution, doctrinal heresies and the dark ages to name just a couple. In addition to these challenges the church has also faced challenges related to the understanding of what it is supposed to be doing. Some churches think they should be primarily showing love to the world. Some churches believe that they should be condemning and criticizing the world. Some churches adhere to the belief that they should be like the world and are hardly distinguishable from the world. The teaching of Jesus to be “in the world, but not of the world”⁸ is easier said than done. It is apparent to the casual observer that the interpretation of what the church should be doing is not as clear as one would think. Therefore, the first place to start with discovering what is the will of God for my church; is to study, interpret and apply the Word of God in relation to the church. Once we have discovered what the Scriptures say regarding discipleship then we move on to develop principles for the church and from the principles we create a definition for discipleship. Defining “disciple” is discovering God’s will for my life. Defining “discipleship” is discovering God’s will for my church.

Just like the previous chapter, we will follow a similar approach to defining what “discipleship” looks like. First we will examine the Scriptures, then we will extract the principles and finally we will create a working definition for discipleship. Then we will illustrate and explain how a local church can begin to pursue the Great Commission in their context.

The first passage is called the **Great Commandment** and it is found in Matthew 22:36-40. As is so often the case, the occasion of Jesus’ teaching is a question... *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And He said to him, “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.” “This is the great and foremost commandment. “The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”* This passage is full of things to consider for the church who would seek to “make disciples.” From this passage, the greatest command in the Law is to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind. Over 600 laws and statutes were reduced to two. Love God and love your neighbor. Christian discipleship must be about helping people grow in their love and respect for the most high God. The scope of this love should be all encompassing. Our total heart, our total soul and our total mind is to be devoted to God.

The second part of the greatest commandment is like the first in that it revolves around love, but it is directed toward loving people. In order to love God properly we must be involved in showing and expressing love to our neighbors. Jesus explained in the parable of the Good Samaritan that the way we show love to our neighbor is by meeting their needs. The greatest and most pressing need that most people have is the need to come into a right relationship with God. Therefore the first step in Christian discipleship is to develop people who passionately love God and love people. It must be intentional.

In fact it could be argued that if you don't love people then you do not love God. Discipleship calls us to leave the ninety and nine and to go after the one.

The next passage is called the **New Commandment** and it is found in John 13:34-35 where Jesus says, *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."* This conversation takes place in the upper room the night that Jesus is delivered over to be crucified. Here Jesus takes love one step further. We are to love God. We are to love our neighbor. And in God's plan we are to love other brothers and sisters in Christ. Love is the central component in the kingdom of God. God loves us and sent His son. As a result we can love God. When we love God we will love our neighbor and we will love other believers. In fact, in this passage Jesus said that all men would know that we are disciples IF we have love for one another. Put another way, if we don't love our brothers and sisters in Christ... then the world has a right to conclude that we are not followers of Christ.

The Great Example. After Peter preached on the day of Pentecost the Bible says that up to 3,000 people were saved on the first day of the church. So on the first day of the church age you had a "mega" church with thousands of followers. I call this good news, bad news. The good news was that you had so many people. The bad news was that you had so many people. Can you imagine what the disciples said after Peter preached and the invitation was given and thousands came forward? After baptizing all day maybe the next day they convened a meeting and one of the disciples, probably Thomas, said, "what in the world are we going to do now Peter!" Maybe the conversation went from there to remembering what Jesus told them about loving God, loving people and loving each other. Maybe someone else remembered what he said on the mountain about making disciples and how that they (the disciples) were to teach them. Maybe someone else said, "Wait a minute, that's not what He said. He told us to teach them to OBSERVE. That means we need to teach by example."

Perhaps that is why when you come to Acts 2, the early church adopted these habits: *"They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from **house to house**, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved."*⁹ From this passage alone we can see up to 10 different habits of the early church. Things like:

- Studying the Apostles teaching
- Fellowshiping with each other
- Breaking bread together
- Prayer
- Unity
- Need Meeting
- Met in the Temple

- Met from “house to house”
- Praising God
- And having favor with all the people

To finish out this passage, as a result of their practicing these habits (disciplined adherence) verse 47 says, “And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” The rapid conversion (daily) of the additional believers seems to have been a result of their obedience to the Great Commission. Further, I believe that they met from “**house to house**” to emphasize the importance of example. The Apostle Paul said it this way, “be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” and in Phillipians 4:9 he said, “The things you have learned and received and heard and **seen in me**, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.” Example is critical to the process of discipleship because Christianity is more caught than taught.

The next important passage with ecclesiastical implications is Ephesians 4:11-16 and I call this passage the **Great Plan**. The Bible says, *“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”*

Paul wrote Ephesians when he was in prison (Eph. 6:20) and it was around 62 A.D. In this letter he clearly identifies the role and function of pastors. Pastors are to “equip” the saints and the saints are to do the “work of service.” The equipping has to do with helping the saints “grow up in all aspects into Him” and to become a “mature man.” He or she practices the spiritual disciplines and encounters the grace of God, which in turn enables them to develop Christ likeness. It also involves the body “being fitted together and held together by what every joint, supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, *and that* causes the growth of the body.” This involves the disciple discovering and developing his or her gift and developing in the body (community) to their full potential (see previous chapter’s definition on “disciple”).

The next verse we want to look at in this section is Colossians 1:28. I call this the **Great Ambition**. Again the Apostle Paul writes these words, “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.” Now this verse is very straightforward and if you have ever taken a course on how to study the Bible you learn that when the Bible repeats a phrase you need to pay attention to the repeated phrase. Now look again at the verse above and see if you can spot the repeated phrase. It is repeated three times. What is it? The phrase is “every man.” The idea here is that in our church work we need to figure out how to minister and develop **every person**. From the Ephesians four passage we know that we are supposed to “equip the saints” and from this passage we learn that we need to focus on every person in the body. The challenge of the innovative church is to grow

large and small at the same time. If we do not focus on the individual then the church will become impersonal and it will become an irrelevant exercise, because we cannot transform culture without transformed lives. We are here to make disciples and that requires personal attention.

The last and most famous passage is called the **Great Commission** and it is found in Matthew 28:18-20, “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, *“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* This is obviously the marching orders of the church. This passage contains one command, three participles and one promise. The command is to “make disciples” (see previous chapter) and the participles that indicate mode are “go” (or more literally “in your going”), “baptizing” and “teaching them to observe.” The promise from Jesus is “I will be with you.” Of course the promise of the presence and power of Jesus is predicated on obeying the command of making disciples.

From this one passage there is some exciting news: every church can enjoy the presence and power of Jesus in their church IF they will intentionally, practically and strategically obey the Great Commission. The central message of the Old Testament is this, “obedience brings blessing and disobedience brings a curse.” If we will concentrate on obeying this command then the promise is sure to follow because God cannot lie. An innovative church is not necessarily creating something new, but it is creating new people by the grace of God.

This passage is also global in scale because we are to “make disciples of all the nations.” The only way to reach an exponentially growing world is to implement an exponential strategy. The mission of God is to reach everyone. The methods we develop need to involve multiplication strategies. That is why church planting is so important. Effective discipleship leads to developing effective leaders for the mission of Christ. Now the difficult part is for the church to figure out how to develop disciples who will not only be committed to the person of Christ, but they will also be committed to the mission of Christ. The mission of the church is to reach the world with and through disciples. As a result there must be an **intentional** strategy to develop **individuals** to accomplish the **mission** of the Master.

Characteristics of a disciple making church:

1. **Intentional**- The Great Commandment. The New Commandment. Acts 2:42-47
These passages make it clear that the early church had a clear strategy. That strategy revolved around love. Love for God, love for people and love for believers. This type of love has the ability to crush arguments, confuse enemies and convince skeptics. In the book of Revelation the church of Ephesus left its first love and God gave the church a very specific prescription, “Therefore remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place-- unless you repent.”¹⁰ A church that has lost its love for God won’t move forward with love for the lost. The gates of hades will not be pushed back. Instead the church will be afflicted with the paralysis of analysis. Maintenance becomes the goal while a movement is what is needed. When the church does not move

forward it must move backward in retreat. The solution for reaching the world has always been simple. People transformed by the grace of God have always been God's method. The church must become intentional to develop people who genuinely love God, love people and love believers. This is not a program. This is a pursuit. After all love motivated God to send Jesus in the first place. Love is God's plan for God's people.

2. **Individual-** Ephesians 4:11-16. Colossians 1:28. The focus in this series of verses is to for Pastors to equip the saints to spiritual maturity and for the saints to do the works of service. We are saved to serve. In the Ephesians passage the emphasis is on every person "being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body." The body of Christ will grow as 'each individual part' does its unique specific function in the body. The converse is true as well... if each part of the body is not functioning properly then the body will not grow. Church growth is really more of a matter of growing and developing disciples. The body will grow in quantity as the intentionally develops each individual to reach their full potential in Christ- quality. Because as the church grows in quantity it is going to need quality disciples to lead the people in the church by example. Remember, "Christianity is more caught than taught."
3. **Missional-** Matthew 2:18-20. This is perhaps the most difficult one to address because the church seems to be stuck in a maintenance mindset. Pastors are viewed as shepherds who feed and care for difficult sheep instead of a general preparing soldiers for battle. The Great Commission makes it clear that we are to make disciples "of all the nations." Yet every year we seem to get further and further behind. Why would God give us a mandate that is impossible to accomplish? The answer is that He didn't. It is possible to reach the world with the gospel if we understand that the full development of every person is critical to reaching the world. As the person grows in Christ likeness and maturity we intentionally create opportunities for them to engage directly in the mission of the master. We cannot reach the world if we do not equip the saints to reach their full potential. Based upon these principles here is my definition of discipleship:

Discipleship is the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ's mission.

DISCIPLESHIP ACTION POINTS:

The church must come to grips with the clear call of the Great Commission to "make disciples." The local church is the expression of the kingdom of God and the kingdom is the expression of the mission of God and the mission springs from the heart of God. In order to accomplish the mission, the church must develop disciples to their full potential. The way to grow the body is to grow the individual. The way to reach the world is to develop disciples to their full potential. The question for each and every local church is how?

The answer of how you make a disciple is tied to the definition of what a disciple looks like. This is my definition of a disciple based upon the principles that Jesus gave:

A disciple is a person who has trusted Christ for salvation and has surrendered completely to Him. He or she is committed to practicing the spiritual disciplines in community and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission.

A local church must intentionally set about to create that type of follower of Christ. To make a disciple you must first win the person to Christ, therefore the local church must discover and develop evangelistic approaches that are effective in leading people to salvation. The next thing a disciple needs is to get connected to the local church and so a church needs to think through how to connect a disciple to groups and ministries within the local church. The word assimilation is used here. The Great Commission emphasizes the aspect of “teaching them to observe” so the growing disciple needs good examples. Therefore the church needs to have a group ministry that is intentional and developmental. This group ministry can be a medium sized group if the medium sized group breaks down into a smaller group where individuals can be challenged to grow through imitation.

As the disciple grows in Christ likeness the church needs to help them discover their gifts and abilities for the kingdom and so the church needs to help the disciple learn to serve. Currently the “program driven church” has many entry level place for disciples to serve, but the church must be careful to maintain a priority on disciple making ministries. Specifically a local church needs to help disciples with leadership potential become apprentices in Great Commission ministries and mentor those disciples to the point where they become leaders in the multiplication ministries of the church. Finally there are a percentage of disciples, when they are fully developed, that need to be involved in the planting and starting of new churches. Again the world is growing at an exponential rate, we must employ exponential strategies. The disciples who develop to this point have learned to do pastoral ministry inside their local church and now they are ready to advance the kingdom and mission of God by either being a part of a new church plant or leading the plant.

Can you imagine what would happen if every church planted one church. There are approximately 330,000 churches in America. If every church planted a church we would have 660,000 churches. Can you imagine the impact that would have on our culture? Then if they all planted a church, reaching the world would not be a dream, it would be a reality. But please understand this... the starting point is winning the people in your town to Christ, then it is growing them to reach their full potential and eventually it involves sending them into the world on mission. **WIN, GROW, SEND.** Now I realize that this is a chapter on discipleship and not church planting, but they are intrinsically linked together, because when a disciple “has been fully trained, he will be like his teacher.”¹¹ God sent Jesus to this world to redeem it and now Jesus sends us to make disciples. The process of making disciples is called discipleship and it looks like this:

Discipleship is the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents and abilities in fulfillment of Christ’s mission.

My hope and prayer is that as you read this book you will accept the challenge to become a disciple making church. If you become a disciple maker or if your church becomes a disciple making church you will then qualify to receive the promise of the Great Commission which is the presence and power of Jesus.

¹ Joel 2:28-32

² Acts 2:21

³ Matthew 26:74

⁴ Fox's Book of Martyrs

⁵ Matthew 16:13-19

⁶ <http://biblecommenter.com/matthew/16-18.htm>

⁷ John 20:21

⁸ John 17

⁹ Acts 2:42-47

¹⁰ Rev. 2:5

¹¹ Luke 6:40