

True Conversion: The Foundation of Making Disciples Part 1
Matthew 28:16-20

"The one indispensable requirement for producing godly, mature Christians is godly, mature Christians."
— Kevin DeYoung

Introduction: Perhaps enough time has passed to forget, but the name **Bernie Madoff** typically leaves a visceral reaction for most. For decades Bernie was one of the most respected names on Wall Street, becoming chairman of the NASDAQ Stock exchange in 1990, 1991, and 1993, and seen as a mentor by many a young investor. Courted by politicians and clients alike, his advice was sought across a wide array of investors, including being given a seat on the SEC (securities & exchange commission), the very oversight board that should have been investigating him. He had built an empire under a two-armed umbrella: a classic stock brokerage ran by his two sons and visible to all, and an *asset management* company that was exclusive, largely hidden, and downplayed by Madoff himself. It was this second arm that consistently churned out massive returns to investors, averaging close to 11% annually whether the rest of the market went up or down. Most believed in Madoff's brilliance, thinking that he had created a new algorithm or way to beat the system, so most did not think too much more about it, especially those that were making money. But what Madoff was doing was backdating returns of investments and engaging in the largest **Ponzi scheme** in history, never investing ANY money but instead continuing to pay out cash from continued investments flowing in.

This audacious plan actually **worked**...until it didn't. When the market crashed in 2008, the gig was up. Madoff could not secure enough new capital to pay off his current investors, and with the money running out, he finally, after over 30 years (and some believe close to 40) he finally came clean to his stunned and floored sons, who had no idea that it was all a scheme, and to the government. Bernie would be arrested in 2008 and sent to prison in 2009, where he was up for parole in 2159, but instead died of kidney disease on April 14, 2021. The wake he left behind was massive. Over **\$65 billion** was lost (though a considerable amount has been returned), including celebrities such as John Malkovich (losing millions), Steven Spielberg, Sandy Koufax, Larry King, and **Kevin Bacon** (which means at one level, we were all connected to it). Upon news of Madoff's arrest, French aristocrat and financier **Rene-Thierry Magon de la Villehuchet** (veeel-ou-shay) cut his wrists at the desk of his chateau after losing \$1.4 billion of his investors' money. Madoff's brother Peter went to jail for 10 years, his son Andrew would never talk to his father again, dying in 2014 of Lymphoma, and his other son Mark committing suicide on the two-year anniversary of Bernie's arrest.

Sometimes *making disciples* as a primary mission of God's church functions more like a Madoff Ponzi scam than we'd like to admit. We don't want to do the hard work of actually cultivating relationships and pointing people to the transformative work of Jesus Christ, but instead get them to sign up to **attend, observe, and maybe even serve in some capacity**. Thinking that **gathering** people or **adding numbers is equivalent to making disciples, churches have fallen prey to a scheme that celebrates numeric growth rather than life change**. It's a fascinating conversation to have with pastor friends around the country who are part of churches with thousands of people: "*we are good at gathering people, but we're weak at discipleship.*" We have often reversed the order of "**belong – believe**", hoping that if people *felt* like they belonged to the church they would eventually believe, but the opposite is actually true: *conversion through belief in Jesus is the basis of belonging in the family of God, the church and anything less leaves people confused at best and damned at worst.*

Making disciples is difficult, time consuming, not always easily quantifiable, dependent on God's work, and often ends in heartbreak. Simply look to Jesus' intimate three years with 12 men and you will see examples of all of that and more. In calling people to follow Him, Jesus had more people **reject Him** than yield to Him, at least initially. It would be much easier if Jesus had left us a command, a mission that stated, "**Gather crowds, fill a room, get people to acknowledge they believe in God, rattle off a prayer, or have them recite a verse or 2.**" Instead, Jesus gave a *command mission* that involves genuine followers of Jesus as the conduit to help make genuine followers of Jesus. Which simply means that the mission can only be accomplished by those who have already tasted of the mission in their own life, not by being part of a crowd. *Truly, everyone is welcome here, but only those who have yielded their lives to Christ in faith and repentance can join us on our mission.*

As we look freshly at **Matthew 28:16-20**, we are not only reminded that the scope of our mission is to **reach the nations, but also to MAKE DISCIPLES**. This morning we want to see what a disciple is and is not, and what we are calling a drowning world to.

*"Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw Him, **they worshipped Him**, but some doubted.*

*And Jesus came and said to them, '**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and MAKE DISCIPLES of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**'*

Matthew 28:16-20

If loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind is the **Great Commandment**, the greatest commission we have been given is to **make disciples**, which becomes **a clarion call for us**. This is a message of clarity or instruction about what **action is needed**. It often included a trumpet blast (like in Leviticus 25:9 which signaled the Year of Jubilee!) and to seek the LORD (Isa. 55:6). In a day of **political wrangling, fear mongering, and truth mingling**, we must get above the fray as a church and respond to our **primary call**. What is at stake? Not only the health of the church, but the offer of salvation to thirsty, miserable, hopeless, and dying world. We have been left a mission that is *temporal*, meaning we'll have worship and service in heaven, but our time helping others see and savor Jesus Christ is only on this side of eternity. But greater than our effectiveness is the **glory of God itself** (Ps. 46:10), since God does ALL THINGS for His own glory and we get to enjoy the downstream effects. We want to be a church marked by our dependence on Christ, our passion for the gospel, and our commitment to discipleship, to the glory of God alone.

So over the next few weeks we want to look a bit more in depth on subject, what it means to **be** a disciple, how we engage **in** discipleship, and bring clarity to its goal and purpose. This will undoubtedly be review for most, but we most certainly have the plague of forgetfulness in our minds and hearts, so reinvigorating our hearts on these main things is a must.

A Working Definition of "Disciple"

A few observations to make of the text of **Matthew 28:16-20**:

1. **The context of the command was worship** - Often there is an artificial debate in the church regarding its purpose: is the purpose of the church to gather and worship or to reach the lost?

The answer, of course, is YES! We gather to worship and scatter to witness, recognizing worship happens both individually *and* corporately, but reaching the lost is something that happens as a result. In fact, **worship is both the impetus and goal of making disciple-making.** We are motivated by our love and zeal FOR Christ, and our desire to see Him magnified by all nations, as well as knowing that when people turn from self-love and self-worship to worshipping Christ, true joy and satisfaction can be had. *"The complete focus (of the disciples) was on Christ. That is the essence of true worship - single minded, unhindered, and unqualified concentration on Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior."*¹ This was Paul's goal and motivation later on in the epistles: *"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified...so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:2, 5), and later declared the goal of life/marriage/singleness was simply "to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord." (1 Cor. 7:35).* Worship is integral in making disciples, which answers the all-important question: **how do I grow in my ability/desire to make disciples?** The answer: Are you growing in your love, devotion, and commitment to Christ? If so, loving people and seeing them find their joy in Christ will be a clear intention and goal. This is what John Piper said about the connection between worship and missions, which is the downstream result of making disciples:

"Therefore, worship is the goal and the fuel of missions: Missions exists because worship doesn't. Missions is our way of saying: the joy of knowing Christ is not a private, or tribal, or national or ethnic privilege. It is for all. And that's why we go. Because we have tasted the joy of worshiping Jesus, and we want all the families of the earth included.

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. (Psalm 22:27)

Seeking the worship of the nations is fueled by the joy of our own worship. You can't commend what you don't cherish. You can't proclaim what you don't prize. Worship is the fuel and the goal of missions"

2. The authority we have in making disciples belongs to Christ alone - Making disciples who love Christ is an impossible task without supernatural intervention. We can have people follow US, but they can only go as far as our weakness will allow. To have someone follow us as we follow Christ (1 Cor. 11:1) takes something far outside of our ability or control. The fact that **all authority in heaven and earth was given to Christ** not only gives us great *assurance* of our mission, but shows us exactly what lane we run in. **Ephesians 1:18-23** tells us what happened after Jesus' resurrection: 1) riches of His glorious inheritance, 2) immeasurable greatness of power toward those who believe, 3) Christ is seated in a position of authority, 4) He has authority over all rulers, power, dominion, and name for all time, 5) Christ is the head of His church. **Do you see how Christ-dominant our mission is? He is the point, the goal, and the means to get it all done.** It is His authority that calls out people from darkness to light, not ours. It is not our ability, eloquence, or creativity that rescues drowning people from their sin, it is His alone, so that through the exercise of His authority, He gets all the glory!

3. Making Disciples is an Active Command for all Disciples - If you study this passage, it becomes evident that though there seems to be multiple commands, in the Greek there is only one, an active imperative: **Make Disciples.** The other commands to *go, teach, and baptize* are tied to this command,

¹ John MacArthur, Matthew Commentary, Vol. 4. p. 338.

but are corollary to it. What does this command mean? What is a disciple? For a word that is known and thrown around in just about every church, we often have a nebulous idea of its true meaning.

According to the *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, a **disciple** is *someone who follows another person or another way of life and who submits himself to the discipline (teaching) of the leader or way*. It means a *learner or one who is taught*. In the OT, Isaiah 8:16 50:4 and 54:13, the idea is "learned" and "taught". In the NT, the term is almost exclusively used in the Gospels and Acts, wherever there is a teacher and those taught, the idea of discipleship is present. Though we know Jesus called His 12 disciples, but also those who were sympathetic to His teaching, the **Pharisees and John the Baptist** were also said to have their own disciples (Mark 2:18, Matt. 9:14). At the core definitional level, a disciple is one who follows and learns. **So what differentiates a disciple of Jesus?**

Not everyone who claims Christ are true disciples

*"Not everyone who says to me 'LORD, LORD', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who **does the will of my Father who is in heaven**. On that day **many** will say to me, 'LORD, LORD, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then **I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'**"*

Matthew 7:21-23

Jesus uttered some of the most chilling, sobering, and scary words at the conclusion of His sermon on the mount to His disciples, clarifying that there will be **MANY** who believe they will be ushered into heaven, only to find out they were never part of His kingdom. They will look on the things they've done, rather than to their Savior, for access to eternal life. Jesus had demonstrated this in His teaching to the disciples at another time as well:

In John 6, Jesus had large crowd following Him (after feeding the 5,000 days before). There were some who had followed Him around and had learned from Him, and they were referred to as disciples (John 6:60), which is the basic and strict definition of the term. But as He began to narrow the focus of His teaching to believing in Him specifically (6:29) as the means of eternal life (6:47) and receiving Him as the Bread of Life (6:51), the crowds began to struggle with this idea. Some of His disciples found this teaching too difficult to listen to, so many turned back and no longer walked with Him (6:66). This prompted Peter's confession of faith, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God.*" (6:68-9) But Jesus also reminded the disciples that even one of the 12 was a devil (yikes), knowing that Judas would betray Him (6:70-71). Those who followed Jesus for a while WERE His disciples, but only those who remained were truly His (Matt. 10:22)

In my time of ministry, there have been patterns and experiences over and over of people who **CLAIM** to be a follower of Jesus but whose life does not reflect it. They exist in their own self-autonomy, habitually walk in a worldly, sinful way, and never have treasured their Savior. Before unpacking why this is so dangerous for individuals, families, and the church as a whole, let me give this gentle disclaimer: **1) Self-evaluation is GOOD (2 Cor. 13:5 – "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? ---Unless indeed you fail to meet the test!")** since it clarifies our assurance and thus confidence, but we are NOT trying to get true believers to question their salvation, or get you to over-worry or become fearful. This over-realized examination can lead **to a fruit inspective, grace suspiciousness that breeds a seed bed of self-righteousness and legalism**. That is NOT the goal. **2)** Next week we will look at the marks and

power of true change in **conversion**, including what faith and repentance look like. Our goal is to see what a true disciple IS, so that we can move to actually making disciples, since only maturing disciples can make maturing disciples.

False teaching WILL bring converts. The wide path that leads to destruction is wide for a reason. When the church is full of well meaning, well intentioned, but unredeemed people who THINK or CLAIM to be believers but have not been converted by faith and repentance in Jesus, there are several terrible consequences:

- 1) **Individuals are deceived and are set up for the damning words of Jesus**
- 2) **Churches cannot function fully as a people set apart to love, worship, and be prepared as God's possession for eternity**
- 3) **The churches witness to the nations is subverted, powerless, and shifts from individual responsibility to hoping someone else gets it done**
- 4) **God's name is defamed** – *false conversions do not display the power of redemption to change someone from death to life through belief in the finished work of Jesus.*

Becoming a disciple of Jesus entails becoming a **learner** (the definition of "*mathetai*"), a follower of all that He taught, and denying ourselves, taking up our cross, and following Him (Luke 9:23). This does not all come into full maturation all at once, but produces a lifetime of followership, of growing, and changing into the likeness of Jesus. For the rest of our time, let's remind ourselves of several false or deceptive reasons people would think they are believers:

1. **Looking to a decision at some point in the past** – Following Christ certainly demands thoughtful commitment, but nowhere in Scripture is praying a prayer or raising a hand the pathway or assurance of salvation. There have been potentially good motives to try to quantify what's going on in someone's mind and heart by an external expression, but the Biblical expression of that is **baptism**. This was what the **rich young ruler** was looking for as he approached Jesus (**Mark 10:17-22**) but Jesus let him walk away "*disheartened and sorrowful*", since he would have had to give up all of his possessions.
2. **An Addition to our life rather than a complete yielding** – The aforementioned rich young ruler was challenged by Jesus to give up his wealth, but it was clear he loved his material gain more than his desire to follow Jesus. When we frame salvation as something that is NOT a call to die and be radically transformed, we make the call of salvation some kind of selfish gain. Churches will be packed with deceived people if they simply think that Jesus is there to forgive, answer prayer, and love but actually DEMANDS nothing
3. **Lack of considering the cost of following Jesus** – "*Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life.*" Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Cheap grace produces flimsy followers, and that is exactly what Jesus taught in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13). Time will be the revealer of true faith, as the temptations and siren calls of life reveal whether faith is true or false. Jesus is the LORD of our life (1 Cor. 12:3), meaning HE is in control, not us. The cost of salvation is a radical death to self and a yielding dependence on Him.

4. **Misunderstanding of true conversion** - Salvation is a miracle that only God can accomplish, and conversion is NOT something we can control. It entails change from the inside out, not outside in. It is not about moral improvement but transformation. This directly comes when someone does not believe or understand the **depth of their sin or the greatness of God's glory and holiness**.

5. **Lack of love of Jesus Christ, the turning to obey, and loving God's Word** – The test of true faith in 1 John reveal that salvation produces change with clear marks of obedience (1 John 2:3), abiding in Christ (2:5), laying down our lives for others (3:16), walking by the Spirit (3:24), and loving God and His commandments (5:2), all out of the fact that we acknowledge our sin (chapter 1) and the fact that Christ is our Advocate and propitiation (2:1-2)

We can no more give someone a new heart than we can get someone saved by having them repeat after us. We appeal by faith that others would be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5), but cannot make that happen. This demands that we are clear about **true conversion**, which we will look at next week. For now, we are wise to examine ourselves, to make sure that our identity is in Christ alone, that our salvation is not banking on a decision in the past but a faith driven pursuit in the present, and the hope securing trust in our forgiveness.

*“Jesus of Nazareth always comes asking disciples to **follow him**--not merely "accept him," not merely "believe in him," not merely "worship him," but to follow him: **one either follows Christ, or one does not**. There is no compartmentalization of the faith, no realm, no sphere, no business, no politic in which the lordship of Christ will be excluded. **We either make him Lord of all lords, or we deny him as Lord of any.**”*

Lee Camp, Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World