

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S TASK?

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The short answer to this question is, to make disciples for Christ.

IS CHRIST'S MISSION OUR MISSION?

Christ's parting words to His first disciples was, "*All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising 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.*" (Matthew 28:18-20)

Therefore, fulfilling the Great Commission entails nothing other than day in and day out concentrating on this singular task. Christ's mission is our mission only when we engage in making disciples according to the pattern He Himself laid down. This infers that His authority and the promise of His constant presence are guaranteed only to those who engage wholeheartedly in His mission. It is nothing less than blind presumption to claim Christ's promise while ignoring His mission.

This mandate to make disciples extends to every generation of Spirit-born believers and when the church loses sight of Christ's mission, it reproduces something other than disciples for Christ. The church deserves to be ignored by the world when it strays from its *raison d'etre*, for to do so is surely nothing less than being disloyal to Christ.

Jesus did not ask us to create movements or denominations, or to gather people together who agree with our theological view of the Bible; He did not command us to make so-called "worshippers" either; to the contrary, His command is explicit, "make disciples". Which is, to guide Spirit-born believers who are committed to Him to completely adopt and practise His view of life as the only true one.

I am not anti-church, nor am I against structure *per se*, firstly because the word church (ἐκκλησία) is plural and necessarily suggests some form of fellowship and structure. Secondly, because it is obvious that we can do far more, and are more effective when we commit ourselves to working together in achieving a common goal than we can as isolated individuals. And thirdly because our Lord gathered others around Himself to share the responsibility of His mission; He had no intention of working solo.

The ever present danger of a formal structure lies in the fact that those responsible for guiding its energies and resources can lose sight of their primary goal, consequently the organisation becomes an end in itself. And when our energies and resources serve to propagate an organisation for its own sake, while we ignore the very reason for its existence, we forfeit our *raison d'etre*. The organisation usurps its purpose and becomes the reason for its existence instead of being the means through which the purpose is achieved.

ARE CHRIST'S METHODS OUR METHODS?

Christ never coerced anyone, He confronted them with truth.

Jesus never pressured anyone into making a “decision for the Gospel”. He simply presented the truth directly or indirectly in various ways to men and women in the manner He knew they would best grasp it, clearly showing them their options. Alternatively, He left them to think through the implications of truth for themselves, leaving them to make up their own minds, and to live with the consequences.

In the measure in which they responded to Him, He was able to lead them on to the next step of discipleship. *“Line upon line, precept upon precept.* He never coerced anyone; He never resorted to high power sales tactics. Christ confronted people with the truth about God and themselves. So far as He was concerned, it was up to them to deal with it; how they responded in turn determined His response to them.

The parable of the sower is one example of His method. When His disciples enquired into its meaning, He pulled them up for their dullness in failing to think through the truth; yet He did take time to explain its meaning to them, so they could more fully understand and respond to the truths it presented. Christ knew full well that people respond differently to the truth about God and themselves and this produced differing results, (this is what the parable teaches) yet He was quite prepared to *“cast His bread upon the waters”*, knowing that the Word of God would always *“accomplish what it was sent out to do.”*

The parable suggests that we can depend on the truth to always produce a genuine harvest, as it has the innate ability to distinguish between falsehood or insincerity and itself. Truth blossoms to full fruit when honestly embraced.

Christ’s method entailed always placing moral responsibility with the individual.

In Luke 18:18-27 we read about a certain ruler who questioned Jesus about the primary condition for earning eternal life. We are also told that he was a man of means, who according to his own confession measured up to well-known Jewish moral laws, and was therefore considered a good man. His question, *“What shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* reveals that to him religion was following a right course of action. The fact that he posed this question to Christ suggests that he was fairly confident of the correctness of his own view. I don’t think he expected to be put down.

I also don’t see any reason to doubt the man’s claim that so far as he was concerned, from a very young age he had measured up adequately to the requirements of these laws. I suspect he sincerely believed he did qualify, and possibly expected Christ to endorse his personal belief. Our Lord certainly didn’t challenge him on that score, but Jesus didn’t let him off the hook either. Instead, He reminded him of a higher law that the man had overlooked, the law of self-giving. This is what caused him to choke.

Because this young man had confused his life with his possessions, he missed a golden opportunity of discovering the highest meaning for his life. Here was a life full of promise, committed to truth from a young age, yet lost to God’s Kingdom. This is surely perplexing irony if ever there was.

The man failed to understand the truth that to insist on possessing something is to be enslaved by it, while to own nothing is not only freedom from being possessed by it, but freedom to give yourself without ever counting the cost. The fact that we enslave ourselves to whatever we insist on possessing, is a moral law which knows of no exceptions. The man, we are told, *“. . . when he heard these things, . . . became very sad; for he was extremely rich.”*

Incidentally, we should be careful about misusing this passage to knock all wealthy people, that is not its intention; It's meant to strike at the ever present danger of confusing possessions with life; which is something not only peculiar to wealthy people.

It is clear from His response that Christ never assumed moral responsibility for the man's failure to accept and apply divine truth. Nowhere in the Gospels do we read that Jesus pursued this man in order to convince Him that he had taken the wrong course; that he'd risked his chances of eternal life by betting on the correctness of his own view of life against Christ's view. Our Lord wasn't surprised at the man's response, only saddened by it. Apparently the door to life can prove to be too narrow even for someone committed to high ethical standards.

WHAT IS ENTAILED IN MAKING DISCIPLES FOR CHRIST?

Of necessity, making disciples involves knowing what is the end result, as well as knowing how to go about achieving it. On closer examination, we'll discover that the Great Commission suggests details about both aspects.

One of the key phrases in the Great Commission (nothing can be omitted or minimised) is, "*teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*"; which raises the question, *what did Jesus teach His disciples?*

So far as I can establish, He taught them the following seven foundational truths:

- 1) God forgives sin (the only serious hindrance to fellowship with Him) and transforms human nature morally only through the Redemptive *cross of Christ*. (Matt. 26:26-28)
- 2) *God's love* must determine their motives, thereby influencing their thoughts and actions. (Matt. 5:43-48)
- 3) They were to live by *faith in God*, which meant their complete confidence in and reliance on His ability to meet their needs and the needs of His purpose in every circumstance. (Matt. 7:25-34)
- 4) They were to obey and have complete confidence in *God's Word* to guide, correct and sustain them at all times. (John 8:31-32)
- 5) *Prayer* was the means by which they would come to understand and accomplish God's purposes. (Luke 11:1-13)
- 6) Their willing and irrevocable *commitment to God's will* was the means by which they would discover the true meaning of their lives as well as accomplish God's will. (Luke 14:25-35)
- 7) They could depend on the *Holy Spirit* to impart Christ's life to them, to guide and lead them into all truth, and also to enable them accomplish Christ's purpose. (John 16:5-15)

These seven principles are foundational to disciple making. When we leave out or minimise any one, we compromise Christ's mission and short-change the Kingdom of God. As a result, we will reproduce something other than a disciple of Christ.

Therefore, when making disciples we must know the end result as well as how to go about achieving the goal; only then can we engage wisely in the task of making disciples. At the outset then, it is essential to know the answers to the following three important questions:

- (1) *What is a disciple of Christ?*
- (2) *Who is a candidate for becoming a disciple of Christ?*
- (3) *How does one become a disciple of Christ?*

WHAT IS A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST?

A disciple of Christ, is someone who is a Spirit-born believer, entirely committed to Him, who is inculcating the aforementioned seven principles into their daily lives, thereby demonstrating they have entirely adopted Christ's view of life as the only true one.

WHO IS A CANDIDATE FOR BECOMING A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST?

Christ presents us with a two-fold criteria. Firstly, a candidate for discipleship is someone who "*hungers and thirsts after righteousness.*" (Matt. 5:6) Secondly, it is someone who is willing to sacrifice their entire life in the interests of divine truth. (Luke 9:24-26)

Although the church has an obligation to preach and witness for Christ to all in sundry, this does not necessarily mean we must indiscriminately invest our energy and resources in trying to make disciples for Christ with people who do not meet the above two criteria. This would be futile and self-defeating, never mind missing His purpose altogether. Disciples are people who are both hungry for truth and responsive to truth. To try and make a disciple of someone who lacks these two essential qualities is the same as "*casting pearls before swine.*"

In the world of salesmanship, no sales person worth their salt keeps calling on a business which remains a closed door to them. The sales person carefully discriminates between real opportunities and dead-ends, and directs their efforts accordingly. They learn to recognise a real sales possibility by the fact that the potential client gives them a genuine opportunity at doing business, which they take with both hands and pursue to fruition. They then care for their new client and cement the relationship by meeting the client's expectations through consistent fair pricing, quality and timeous delivery.

I know this personally from years of experience of selling print, which is one of the most cut-throat and demanding businesses around. My clients usually get more out of the deal that I do, but that's how I earn their loyalty and friendship. But I won't waste time on businesses who don't believe they need to do business with me, or are satisfied with, or loyal to their current print supplier. I'd starve to death if I did!

The reason is obvious, we usually pour our energy and resources into projects which produce a return, while ignoring those that don't. Our Lord chose twelve disciples and poured His life and teaching into their lives, He had one failure. That's a record very few of us if any can equal. The reason for His success was His careful selection of candidates in whom He would invest His energies, and it paid dividends.

John Wesley stuck to this very same principle; in fact he said no one should bother to preach where they were not prepared to consolidate their efforts. Which makes complete sense. While preaching the Gospel can be done indiscriminately, (Remember the parable of the sower), making disciples requires wise and prayerful selection. Our best efforts must always be directed at our best opportunities.

Failure to do this carries serious consequences. One is a wasteful use of God's and our precious man power and resources on something other than His purpose. A second is producing something other than a true disciple of Christ. Both are of no use to God's Kingdom. And I'm afraid some if not most of us will have to answer a few embarrassing questions posed by our Heavenly Accountant one day. As for me, I'm reforming immediately and am determined to spend the rest of my days putting in the hard yards to make up for my own past ignorance and failures.

HOW DOES ONE BECOME A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST?

“Teaching them to observe whatsoever I have taught you.”

The church has been entrusted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ for one purpose only, to propagate it. We are not the Sunday Club, we are the *“company of the committed.”* Besides ignoring it, there are only four things we *can* do with the Gospel of Christ. (1) Receive it; (2) live it; (3) share it; (4) teach others to do the same.

When the body of Christ meets on the Lord's Day or on any occasion, it should in some way be edified by the Spirit, through the Word of God and mutual godly fellowship, to better understand and equip itself to fulfil Christ's Great Commission together in the power of the Holy Spirit, which is to make disciples. We accomplish this in various ways by constantly teaching and reminding ourselves of the following seven principles.

PRINCIPLE #1

God forgives sin (the only serious hindrance to fellowship with Him) and transforms human nature morally only through the Redemptive cross of Christ.

(Matt. 26:26-28)

“For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ, and through Christ to reconcile to himself all things on earth, or in heaven, by making peace through His blood (which was) shed on the cross.” (Col. 1:20)

The first step in becoming a disciple of Christ is to humbly respond to God's drawing you to Christ (prevenient grace). Then to confess your sin to Him, repent of it; ask Him for forgiveness, and trusting only in Christ's atoning death to place yourself entirely at His mercy and be born again by the Spirit of God, who will bear witness with your spirit that you have become a new creation in Christ. To be a disciple of Christ, you must first be born-again by the Spirit of God. After that, you learn to co-operate with God and allow Him to rebuild your life after the pattern of His Son.

PRINCIPLE #2

God's love must determine our motives, thereby influencing our thoughts and actions.

(Matt. 5:43-48)

God's love is the only adequate motive for life. A lawyer once asked Christ, "*What is the greatest commandment?*" Without blinking, Jesus replied, "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and love your neighbour as you love yourself. On these two, hang all the law and the prophets.*" God's love is the supreme motive for life. "*Love your enemies*"; "*Do good to those who spitefully use you.*" "*Turn the other cheek*" Can we make exceptions to the rule of love? If so, under what circumstances? If Jesus didn't curse His murderers from the cross, should we follow His example?

God's love is there for the asking. His love is available on the turn to anyone who unpretentiously asks Him for a liberal dose of it, which will immediately change any situation when honestly applied. Our relationships become mangled not because God's love is deficient, but because we underestimate the love of God. God's love is the most powerful and ennobling force humanity can ever practice. "What we need is not the dignity of man, but the dignity of God." God's love was the cure for duplicity, as Paul said, "*Let love be sincere.*"

PRINCIPLE #3

Live by *faith in God*, which means our complete confidence in and reliance on His ability to meet our needs and the needs of His purpose in every circumstance.

(Matt. 7:25-34)

At no point in His life was Christ ever anxious about material needs, or about how He would accomplish the Father's will. He entrusted Himself entirely into God's loving care and went on with His day as it unfolded before Him, and His heavenly Father never once failed Him.

The two problems we all encounter with faith is (1) either misplacing it, or (2) failure to fully trust God's character. We misplace our faith when we rest it anywhere but in God Himself. Whenever Christ taught about faith, He implied faith in God. It is a mistake to think that if only I believe hard enough, God is compelled to answer my prayer. This is no different from a child closing its eyes tightly and wishing to see a fairy. That's wishful thinking, not faith. Faith is honestly depending on God. It's knowing that God knows my needs even before I ask Him; it's having the confidence that "*God will meet all my needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus.*"

But the second problem of not trusting God's character is far more serious, because it strikes at the very heart of the object of our faith, God. To doubt God's character is to make Him a liar. Failure to trust God's character is a far more common mistake. One time Jesus asked His disciples, "*Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish will he?*" The problem here lies not with God being confused about what's in our best interest, but with us, because we think He actually does not know what's best for us.

The only way to prove faith, is to test it against real life to see if it actually does work. Faith is betting your life on the fact that because God is love, He will never stab anyone in the back. When we learn to rest our hearts and minds in this fact, nothing in life has the ability to upset our applecart, because we know that God will take care of any and every situation confronting us.

PRINCIPLE #4

Obey and have complete confidence in *God's Word* to guide, correct and sustain us at all times.

(John 8:31-32)

The sole purpose of God's Word is to bring us to commit ourselves to nothing less than personal obedience to divinely revealed truth. Our Lord bluntly asked a group of His would be followers the question, "*Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and do not what I say?*" We don't find their answer recorded in Scripture, because the answer is obvious; they never committed themselves to act on His teaching.

What Christ taught His disciples came from the Word of God after it had been incorporated into His own life. Someone said the preaching of Oswald Chambers was an exposition of his Christian life. All true witnessing, preaching and teaching of God's Word ought to be nothing less than sharing truths which we personally obey. "*Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every Word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.*"

PRINCIPLE #5

***Prayer* is the means by which we come to understand and accomplish God's purposes.**

(Luke 11:1-13)

Jesus taught His disciples firstly that they should pray. In Matthew 7:7 He says "*Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it shall be opened to you.*" The Greek tense brings out the meaning much clearer than the English translation. It actually means "*make it your habit to ask, seek and knock.*"

Christ made prayer His daily habit. To Him it wasn't a knee jerk reaction to a sudden crisis; prayer was His daily habit. He lived by prayer. He taught His disciples that unless they prayed habitually, they would find themselves ensnared by the inevitable temptations of life. This is what "*Pray lest you enter into temptation*" actually implies.

Secondly, that they should not be feint hearted and learn to persevere in prayer, as prayer is no easy matter; there are obstacles to be overcome. Prayer is most difficult because it means waiting on God's answer; and this means submitting my entire being to His will and His way. Prayer is not only the means by which we receive God's guidance, His gifts etc., prayer is submission to God's will. When He leads us to a course of action, our own ideas have to go out of the window. Through prayer we realign our will to God's will.

But prayer is also the means by which we nurture our life and relationship with God. Prayer is firstly fellowship with God, it is an expression of our gratitude to God for His goodness to us; then it is intercession for others, finally, tacked on at the end, we may legitimately name our own needs with the assurance that our heavenly Father not only knows all these things, but that He is already working them out in everyone's best interests.

PRINCIPLE #6

Our willing and irrevocable *commitment to God's will* as the means by which we discover the true meaning of our lives as well as accomplish God's will.

(Luke 14:25-35)

Knowing and obeying God's will was the supreme object of Christ's life. He lived for nothing else but to do His Father's will. In John 4:34 He said, "*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work.*" John 5:30.

He said, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, my sister and my mother."

"*Whoever loses his life for my sake . . .*" This is a primary condition for discipleship. Paul summed it up in Romans 12:1. Where he uses the Greek word "*urge*", which was the word used by Roman commanders when urging their men into battle to die for Rome if need be. Many knew they would never return to fight again, and they didn't.

As Christ's disciples we need to learn that we can find the true meaning of our lives life only by sacrificing ourselves entirely to God's will, which is the only way God's purposes can be achieved on earth. "Thy will be done on earth (*in my life*) as it is in heaven."

Christ lived and died for the will of the Father, to enable you and I to live and die for the will of the Father. Total commitment is always the price tag for loyalty.

PRINCIPLE #7

We can depend on the *Holy Spirit* to impart Christ's life to us, and to guide and lead us into all truth.

(John 16:5-15)

In none of this are we left to our own devices. Christ's promise of divinely imparted life by the presence of the Holy Spirit is our assurance of salvation (Rom. 8:16), as well as the means for accomplishing His Great Commission. (Acts 1:8)

The book of Acts is the record of the Holy Spirit's redemptive action. This is why, in order to make disciples for Christ, the most important criteria is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. (Acts 4:31) There is no more effective way to becoming a disciple of Christ than personally learning to obey the Holy Spirit. This is because in the final analysis, no one except the Holy Spirit can make a disciple for Christ. However, we do have the privilege of being workers together with God in His task.

STANDARDS FOR MEASURING DISCIPLESHIP

I have a friend who is an electrical engineer, and after his retirement, he was contracted by a company that sent him throughout Africa to inspect the electrical work in all of their new building projects. I asked myself the question one day, how does he know when to approve or fail electrical work? The answer which presented itself to me was simple but obvious; he knows the electrical standards which need to be met, and he measures all the work he inspects against these standards. He approves or fails electrical work solely on this basis.

These seven principles which Christ left us represent His standards for measuring discipleship. He passed on to His disciples seven key principles which He personally learned to obey and practise Himself, and which He expects us to practice and teach. They are His standards for reproducing His disciples who reflect *His* own character, *His* life and who are totally committed to *His* mission.

If you want to know whether you are a disciple of Christ or not, then measure yourself against His seven standards. If you want to know what you are supposed to be doing in the church, implement any or all of them as your job description in the body of Christ, then prayerfully depend on and trust the Holy Spirit for all you are worth, and I guarantee, you'll have the time of your life making disciples for Christ.

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