

# **A Plan to Re-Launch Adult Discipleship**

The Importance of Adult Discipleship  
and the Unique Task of Teaching Adults

A Biblical Case for, and a Model for, Organization,  
a Structure, and Recruiting for Adult Discipleship  
Group Leadership and Membership

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## What is the Purpose of the Church?

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

Matthew 28:16-20 NIV

## What is the purpose of the church?

*Is it to build big buildings?*

*Is it to hire a lot of specialized professional staff?*

*And, just who was Jesus talking to in the first place?*

In describing the purpose statement of the church, many people point to Jesus Christ's direction given to the 11 remaining disciples shortly before He ascended into Heaven. This passage of Scripture is commonly known as *The Great Commission*. In those final words to them he told them something that is key to understanding the actual purpose of the Church.

## What key message did He leave them?

*Jesus Christ told them to "make disciples" (Matthew 28:19).*

But depending on whom you ask, you might find a wide variety of interpretations regarding what it actually means to "make disciples."

***What are your first thoughts when it comes to this passage of Scripture?***

Other versions of the Great Commission are found in Mark 16:14–18, Luke 24:44–49, Acts 1:4–8, and John 20:19–23.

In Luke, Jesus tells the disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness, and promises that they will have divine power.

In John, Jesus says the disciples will have the Holy Spirit and the authority to forgive sins and to withhold forgiveness.

In Acts, Jesus promises the disciples that the Holy Spirit will inspire them.

Most churches today understand it as a command to evangelize the world. In other words, to lead people to faith and repentance in every corner of the world and spread the gospel as far as possible.

And while there is certainly an evangelistic aspect to Christ's command, His instructions go beyond just spreading the gospel. The verb translated as "make disciples" — *mathēteuō* — is beautifully complex, carrying more meaning than simply accumulating converts. It communicates the idea of a *learning believer*—someone who is growing in his faith and his love for the Lord.

Note that the term "disciple" is derived from the Koine Greek word *mathetes*, which means a pupil (of a teacher) or an apprentice (to a master craftsman), coming to English by way of the Latin *discipulus* meaning a learner while the more common English word is student.

A disciple is different from an apostle, which instead means a messenger. While a disciple is one who learns from a teacher, an apostle is one sent to deliver those teachings or a message.

If you had to draw the line between pastors and laymen, here is one place that you can draw that line. We are all called to be Disciples. Not all are called to be Apostles.

Here is what Strong's Concordance has to say:

Cognate: 3100 mathēteúō – Phonetic Spelling: (math-ayt-yoo'-o)

*(from 3101 /mathētēs, "disciple") – to disciple, i.e. helping someone to progressively learn the Word of God to become a matured, growing disciple (literally, "a learner," a true Christ-follower); to train (develop) in the truths of Scripture and the lifestyle required, i.e. helping a believer learn to be a disciple of Christ in belief and practice. See 3101 (mathētēs).*

3101 mathētēs – Phonetic Spelling: (math-ay-tes')

*(from math-, the "mental effort needed to think something through") – properly, a learner; a disciple, a follower of Christ who learns the doctrines of Scripture and the lifestyle they require; someone catechized with proper instruction from the Bible with its necessary follow-through (life-applications). See also 3100 /mathēteúō ("to disciple").*

***Are there any words that jump out at you from Strong's Concordance?***

Here are some places in the New Testament where we find this word:

[Matthew 27:57 KJV] When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph, who also himself was Jesus' disciple:

[Matthew 28:19 KJV] Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:

[Acts 14:21 KJV] And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and [to] Iconium, and Antioch,

### ***What is the point of being a Disciple?***

Jesus' words emphasize not the moment of salvation but the lifetime of sanctification that follows.

He made the same point in **John 8:31** when He said, *"If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine."*

It's the difference between a one-time profession of faith and a lifetime of spiritual growth and increasing Godliness — between counterfeit and genuine conversion.

### ***I will let that sink in for a few moments . . .***

But if the mission and purpose of the church is to make growing, learning believers, why do many congregations limit their efforts to filling seats? Why do so many try to minister by meeting felt needs with worldly gimmicks?

That strategy might attract non-believers, but how does it promote the spiritual growth of the believers already in their midst?

How can you stress the vital importance of sanctification when you're aggressively chasing the trends and interests of a spiritually bankrupt world?

Too many popular preachers and churches today claim they're not interested in reaching or developing the Spiritual lives of believers — that their sermons and services are intended solely for unsaved seekers. They even actively discourage believers who want to dig deeper into the riches of Scripture — who hunger for more than just the most basic elements of the gospel, if they're even getting that much.

***God grant that this not be said of us!***

But those churches have little hope of ever prompting people past the moment of salvation into a life of sanctification. In fact, they're far more likely to lead men and women to shallow faith, stunted spiritual growth, and, sadly, a false or insufficient conversion.

As defined by Christ's command to His disciples, the purpose of the church is to make learning believers — men and women whose lives reflect a deep commitment to and love for the Lord, His Word, and His people.

My fear is that some of us have just enough of God to make us miserable. When in fact Jesus calls us to be disciples that are equipped to be victorious in our lives. It is Jesus Christ's intention that we are being disciples and that discipleship process is part of His sanctifying work in our lives.

I will not argue whether sanctification is crisis or process. I just know that God calls us into a deeper walk with Him.

***Are we actively helping our congregation grow in this clear and critical purpose for the church?***

Pause and ponder that for a moment.

**What are some defining characteristics of Disciples?**

**How about this characteristic? — They “*Love one another*”**

A definition of disciple is suggested by Jesus' self-referential example from the Gospel of John 13:34-35:

*“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

John 13:34-35 (NRSV)

**How about this characteristic? — They are to “*Be transformed*”**

“Discipleship” and “following Christ” are used synonymously throughout the New Testament. The Gospels, Acts, and many of the Epistles urge disciples to be imitators of Jesus Christ or of God himself.

Being *imitators* requires obedience exemplified by moral behavior. With this Biblical basis, Christian theology teaches that discipleship entails *transformation from some other World view and practice of life into that of Jesus Christ*, and so, by way of Trinitarian theology, of God himself.

The Apostle Paul stressed transformation as a prerequisite for discipleship when he wrote that disciples must observe and practice the following:

*“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Romans 12:2 NIV

Therefore a disciple is not simply an accumulator of information or one who tries to change his own moral behavior in conformity with the teachings of Jesus Christ through his own strength and ability. Rather, he seeks a fundamental shift toward the ethics of Jesus Christ in every way, including complete surrender to God through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

In several Christian traditions, the process of becoming a disciple is called the Imitation of Christ. This concept goes back to the Pauline Epistles: He tells the church in Ephesus: ***“be imitators of God”*** (Ephesians 5:1) and ***“be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”*** (1 Corinthians 11:1).

***What about you and me?***

***Are we “disciples”?***

***Are we “Imitators” of Jesus Christ?***

Consider these passages as we close this evening:

*I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

Philippians 3:10-11

*A disciple is not greater than his teacher, but everyone when fully trained will be like his teacher.*

Luke 6:40

*Then he said to them all, “If anyone wants to become my follower, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.*

Luke 9:23-24

**And consider this as well:**

The Great Commission is not just another good idea — though it is a great idea. It is the church’s Purpose Statement. It is her marching orders.

And as far as I know, He never communicated another plan.



