

MOUNT SINAI MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH
DISCIPLESHIP TRAINING

6

How Did the Church Make Disciples?

Biblical Disciple Making, Part 2

I began the last chapter with this question: What is to be our discipleship methodology? I argued that our methodology should be biblical. In determining a biblical methodology, some argue that we should follow Jesus's disciple-making methodology, while others believe the early New Testament church did it differently and we should follow the church's lead.

In the last chapter I presented a brief study of discipleship in the Gospels, focusing on Jesus's message and methods for making mature disciples. In this chapter I will again do a brief study of discipleship, but in the book of Acts and the Epistles. The purpose is not only to discover how the early church made disciples but to address the similarities and differences between their methods and those in the Gospels. The goal is to arrive at a methodology as well as a biblical viewpoint that addresses how our churches can best make disciples in the twenty-first century.

The Church's Message of Discipleship

The best approach to discover and comprehend the church's message of discipleship is to ask questions in two key areas. First, who was the church's audience for its message? Whom was it trying to reach? Who was listening? Second, what did the church say? What was its message for that audience?

The Church's Audience

We learned that in the Gospels Jesus's message was for Israel. He went first to the house of Israel. The nation was his first target and the audience for his message of discipleship. And when he sent out his disciples, their target was the same audience. In Matthew 10:5–6 he instructed the Twelve, "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."

The Jews Plus the Nations

When Jesus commissioned the church, however, he made a change. He added the nations that would include the Gentiles and Samaritans. In Matthew 28:19–20 he instructed the disciples a second time regarding their audience and commanded them, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” In Mark 16:15 he said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” And he further qualified this in Acts 1:8, where he told the disciples to be his witnesses of Christ’s resurrection in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And this is what the church did. Its audience changed from primarily the Jews in Acts 2–7, to the Samaritans in Acts 8:1, 5, and to Gentiles in Acts 10 and beyond.

The Crowds

As the disciples went to the Jews and the nations, they spoke, as Jesus had, to two audiences—the crowds and other disciples. We find a record of Peter’s first sermon after Pentecost, beginning in Acts 2:14: “Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem.’ ” God blessed his sermon, and three thousand people came to faith and were added to the church at Jerusalem (2:41). Again he preached to the crowd in Acts 3:11–26, and five thousand men came to faith in Christ (4:4).

The Disciples

The disciples and others also spoke to other disciples and to the church. For example, in Acts 1:15 Peter spoke to about 120 disciples, urging them to select an apostle to replace Judas. Then in Acts 4:23–31 Peter and John reported to the church their encounter with the chief priests and Jewish elders and then led the church in a prayer that they would speak God’s word with boldness.

Paul’s epistles and those of others in the New Testament were addressed to the disciples located in various local churches and were also used for discipleship.

The Church’s Message

What was the church’s message, and what did it teach about making disciples? The answer is found throughout the Acts and the Epistles. The following passages are just a few examples of what these books teach on discipleship. I will compare them to Jesus’s teaching on discipleship in the Gospels to demonstrate that there is much continuity between his teaching and that of the church. I believe that it is likely the

church used Jesus's teaching as a foundation for their own teaching on discipleship. Perhaps this was in response to that portion of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:20 where Jesus says, "... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

What the Church Taught the Crowd

Jesus taught the crowd how to become disciples (believers). We learned from Jesus's teaching in Luke 14:25–33, where he speaks to the crowd, that each person had to personalize the message according to his or her own life circumstances if the person was to have faith in Jesus and become his disciple. We saw two other examples of this personalization. One is the rich young man in Matthew 19:16–22, and the other is the parable of the good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37. In any case, the way to become Jesus's disciple is by faith alone. Those who believed in him became his disciples.

We see that the same is true for the church. The church's missionaries taught its crowd how to become believers (disciples). Luke writes in Acts 14:21: "They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples." And again he writes in Acts 6:7: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

What the Church Taught the Disciples

The church taught its disciples five general truths about discipleship.

1. *What disciples are supposed to do.* What does God expect? The answer found both in the Gospels and the Epistles is to follow Christ. In Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17 Jesus says to Peter and Andrew, "Come, follow me." In Luke 5:27 he says to Levi (Matthew), "Follow me." And in John 1:43 he says the same to Philip, "Follow me." Jesus's many invitations to the disciples were commands to follow him.

We find a similar concept for the church in 1 Peter 2:21. Peter says to the church, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps." I believe that Peter is talking about following Jesus's lifestyle in general and suffering in particular. In 1 Corinthians 11:1 Paul

underlines the importance of following Christ as well. He exhorts the Corinthian disciples to follow his example as he follows the example of Christ.

2. *What it means to follow Christ.* What is the essence of such following? The answer is service or servanthood. The Savior connects following him with serving him in John 12:26: “Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.” Also note that John 12:26 addresses our serving him, whereas in Matthew 20:26 he adds that we are to serve one another as well: “Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.” Thus the objects of our service are both the Savior and our fellow disciples.

And this has not changed in the life of the church. First, the church is to serve the Lord. Paul tells the Thessalonian disciples how news had reached him that they had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). Similar passages are Acts 20:19; Romans 12:11; and Colossians 3:24.

Second, the church is to serve others. In Ephesians 4:12 Paul explains to the Ephesian disciples how God has gifted the church so they can “prepare God’s people for works of service.” Other similar passages are 1 Corinthians 12:5; Ephesians 6:7; and 1 Peter 4:10.

3. *How disciples follow Christ.* Jesus teaches the disciples in Matthew 16:24–25: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.” Luke records the same message in Luke 9:23–24. We learned in the last chapter that this means we must put his will and plan for our lives in place of our own, ahead of any personal comfort or family obligations (Matt. 8:18–22). Our life is to become his life. And the life we live must be his life. All of this involves dying to ourselves and our wishes for life and embracing the Savior’s will for us.

Paul says much the same to the church in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Here Paul is addressing his position in Christ and his desire to live his life in accordance with that position. And in Romans 12:1 he says, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in

view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” He explores this concept more in depth in Romans 6:1–14, teaching the Roman disciples that at the cross Christ broke the power of sin over their lives. Thus, they no longer have to obey sin. Then he challenges them not to offer their bodies to sin but to God. Finally, Paul exhorts in Philippians 3:7–8: “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ.”

4. *How people can know they are true disciples.* How can we have assurance of our salvation? In John's Gospel Jesus teaches that true disciples have three characteristics. First, they abide in his word (John 8:31–32). He says to new Jewish disciples, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.” The term *hold* means both to agree with and not to abandon. A characteristic of disciples in the Jerusalem church, according to Luke, was that “they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching” (Acts 2:42). Later in Acts 6:1–7 the church faced a problem. The Grecian Jews were being neglected by the Hebraic Jews in the daily distribution of food. The apostles suggested that the church choose seven men to take care of this responsibility. This would free up the apostles' time so they could give attention “to prayer and the ministry of the word” (v. 4). Luke tells his readers in verse 7 that because of this “the word of God spread.”

Second, Jesus teaches that true disciples love other disciples: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35). John wrote his epistle (1 John) for the purpose of helping believers in the church have assurance of their salvation. To accomplish this he provides them with various tests of faith, one of which is love for one another. In 1 John 3:14 he writes, “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers.” Thus, love for one's brother is a strong indication that a person is a believer.

The third characteristic of a disciple is fruit bearing. Jesus states, “This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John 15:8). Fruit bearing both glorifies God and manifests one's discipleship. In

Colossians 1:10 Paul writes to the disciples at Colosse: “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.” And in Galatians 5:16–23 Paul teaches that we can know that the Spirit is in control of our lives by the fruit of the Spirit that we produce. He then identifies the fruit as “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (vv. 22–23).

5. *The result of following Christ.* Jesus says that when we follow him, we will become fishers of men. In Matthew 4:19 and Mark 1:17 he says to Peter and Andrew, “Come, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” In Luke 5 Jesus advises the disciples who are fishing to drop their nets in deeper water. After first objecting, they do so and catch a boatload of fish. Their response is to fear Jesus, and so he says to Peter, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men” (v. 10). Thus, the catch of fish becomes symbolic of Peter’s future ministry to men, when he will make disciples through evangelism. Following Christ produces the result of bringing people to faith.

In Colossians 4:3–4 Paul writes to the church: “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.” Paul, who was a mature disciple, had committed his life to making disciples (believers). When we follow Christ, he uses us to reach others. And if we are not reaching others, it is possible we are not following him.

In summary, now that we have studied both Jesus’s teaching on discipleship along with the church’s teaching, we must revisit the question of whether the church’s teaching in Acts and the Epistles was the same as or different from that of the Savior in the Gospels. Did the early church basically carry out what Jesus had begun? Or did the early church take a direction that was different? Jesus tells the disciples in Matthew 28:19–20 that they are to baptize new converts and teach them “to obey everything I have commanded you.” In the last chapter we examined some of Jesus’s teachings, and in this chapter we discover that the church held to those same teachings and used them as foundational to their own. Thus discipleship for the church continues to follow the same pattern as discipleship in the Gospels.

The Church's Primary Discipleship Passages

To the Crowds

How to become a believer (disciple)—Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 2:14; 3:11–26

To the Believers (Disciples)

1. What believers do: they follow Jesus—1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21
2. What it means to follow Jesus: serving him—Acts 20:19; Rom. 12:11; Col. 3:24; 1 Thess. 1:9 serving others—1 Cor. 12:5; Eph. 4:12; 6:7; 1 Peter 4:10
3. How they follow Christ: they deny themselves and embrace his will for their lives—Rom. 6:1–14; 12:1; Gal. 2:20; Phil. 3:7–8
4. How they know they are following Christ: they believe and hold to his teaching—Acts 2:42; 6:1–7 they love each other—1 John 3:14 they bear fruit—Gal. 5:22; Col. 1:10
5. The result of following Christ: they, in turn, make disciples—Col. 4:3–4

The Church's Method of Discipleship

Now that we have discovered the church's disciple-making message, we turn to its disciple-making methodology. How did the early church make disciples? Did they make disciples as Jesus did in the Gospels, or did the church go in a completely different direction?

When we looked at who made disciples in our study of disciple making in the Gospels, we found that it was one person. It was the master disciple maker—Jesus Christ. He was the one who took the disciples and others aside and disciplined them. However, he was crucified, resurrected, and ascended to heaven, where he now occupies a position of authority at the right hand of the Father.

With Jesus no longer physically present, who is responsible to make disciples in the church? If you recall, I asked and answered this question in chapter 4, where I addressed the roles and responsibilities in disciple making. The answer was the Godhead, the individual, and the church. Each has a part or role in the disciple-making process. The Godhead plays a threefold role: the Father grows churches (1 Cor. 3:5–7), the Son builds churches (Matt. 16:18), and the Spirit transforms churches (2 Cor. 3:17–18). The individual disciple (believer) plays a role in the sense that he or she may or may not be open to being discipled. One must be a willing participant or it will not happen. Finally, the church plays a role that is addressed in Matthew 28:19–20. And it is this role of the church that I want to focus on in this chapter.

As we have discovered in earlier chapters, Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21; Acts 1:8). In a sense Jesus continues to make disciples but does so through his church. Initially he gave responsibility to his disciples, who as the apostles were the key leaders of the early church. Thus discipleship was both the mission and the very life of the church. It is not to be one of several programs of the church; it is *the program* of the church. All the activities and programs of the church work together to make disciples. It is not a ministry in which a few dedicated disciple makers work with a limited number of people who want to mature in their faith. It is a ministry of the church that seeks to make disciples of all its people. Michael Wilkins says, “The primary point for us to keep in mind is that discipling today is always undertaken as an outgrowth of the life of the church, whereas prior to Pentecost it occurred with Jesus personally.”

When the Church Made Disciples

There is much continuity between Jesus’s message of disciple making in the Gospels and that of the church in Acts and the Epistles. The discontinuity is only in who made disciples—in the Gospels it was Jesus, and in the Epistles, the church made disciples.

In the last chapter I pointed out that in the Old Testament and in the Gospels, God’s people did not have the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We can see, for example, in the book of Judges that the Spirit would come into the lives of people, such as various judges, to empower them to lead their people (see Judges 15:14),

but it was not a permanent presence (see 16:20). Jesus said in John 14:17 that the Spirit was with Jesus's disciples and *would be* in them. This was how the Spirit worked in the lives of believers pre-Pentecost.

After Pentecost all this changed. In Acts 1:4 Jesus instructed the disciples not to leave Jerusalem but to wait for the Father's gift of the Holy Spirit. Then he explained in verse 8 that the Holy Spirit would come on them and supply the power they would need to be witnesses of his resurrection in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Thus something changed at Pentecost—the Holy Spirit took up permanent residence in the lives of God's people, the church.

Why is this important? Jesus taught that at least six significant changes would take place regarding the Spirit's role in the life of a disciple after Pentecost.

1. In some way the Holy Spirit would indwell or reside with the disciples. Jesus says, "The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:17).
2. The Holy Spirit would be with them permanently. In John 14:16 Jesus says, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth."
3. The Spirit would enable the disciples to bear witness to the Savior. In John 15:26–27 Jesus says to them, "When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning."
4. The Holy Spirit would help them bear persecution (John 16:1–7).
5. The Holy Spirit would guide them into all truth. In John 16:12–13 Jesus tells them, "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." And he adds that the Spirit will glorify the Son by making his truth known to them (v. 14).
6. In Acts 1:8 Jesus told the disciples that when the Holy Spirit came on them, they would be permanently empowered for their ministries in the church.

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Pre-Pentecost

Post-Pentecost

With them

In them

Temporary indwelling

Permanent indwelling

Did not bear witness of Jesus

Will bear witness of Jesus

Did not help them bear persecution

Will help them bear persecution

Did not guide them into all truth

Will guide them into all truth

Temporary empowerment

Permanent empowerment

The Church's Disciple Making

The church's approach to making disciples differed from Jesus's approach in the Gospels when it came to whom was discipled and when. However, there is much continuity as to how both made disciples. For the church this involved a crowd (a large group meeting), house churches (medium-sized and small group meetings), and one-on-one relationships.

The Crowd

Jesus ministered to the crowd in a large-group setting throughout the Gospels. His mission was to make disciples or lead them to become disciples (believers). The church also ministered to the crowd in a large-group setting. Luke tells us in Acts

2:14, “Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd.” Peter spotted an opportunity for evangelism and took advantage of it. The results are found in verse 41, where Luke says that about three thousand Jews came to faith and were baptized. Luke makes other references to the crowd. In Acts 8:6 Philip proclaimed Christ to a crowd in Samaria. In Acts 13:44–45 Paul preached to a crowd in Antioch, and in 17:13 Paul preached the word of God to a crowd at Berea.

What was the size of these crowds? We know that in Acts 2 the crowd consisted of no fewer than three thousand people. Five thousand men responded to Peter’s second sermon (4:4). And it is likely that the total number including women and children may have been ten to fifteen thousand people.

House Churches

The early church met predominantly in medium and small groups or house churches. Luke reports of the Jerusalem church: “They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (Acts 2:46). In Acts 8:3 he says, “But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.” In Acts 20:20 Paul reminds the elders who were pastors of the house churches in Ephesus: “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”

According to the book of Acts, the first believers came together in the private homes of individuals, such as Mary the mother of John (12:12), Lydia (16:40), Priscilla and Aquila (18:26), as well as others. Twice Paul makes mention of the church that met in the house of Aquila and Priscilla (Rom. 16:3–5; 1 Cor. 16:19), and he speaks of a church that met in Nympha’s house in Laodicea (Col. 4:15) and one at Philemon’s house (Philem. 2). For almost three hundred years the disciples met in homes, not in facilities constructed specifically for church meetings. This did not change until Constantine erected the first church buildings (basilicas) in the fourth century.

What was the size of these house churches? Robert Banks, a former professor at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, writes:

The entertaining room in a moderately well-to-do household could hold around thirty people comfortably—perhaps half as many again in an emergency. The larger meeting in Troas, for example, was so large that Eutychus had to use the windowsill for a seat (Acts 20:9). A meeting of the “whole church” may have reached forty to forty-five people—if the meeting spilled over into the atrium then the number could have been even greater, though no more than double that size—but many meetings may well have been smaller. The average membership was around thirty to thirty-five people.

Thus these house churches likely ranged in size from a medium-sized group of forty to fifty people to a small group of ten to thirty people.

One-on-One Relationships

It is possible that Barnabas discipled Paul one-on-one (Acts 9:26–28), though it is not clear, and he may have discipled John Mark (15:37). Paul may have discipled Silas according to Acts 15:40. A clearer example is that of Priscilla and Aquila, who invited Apollos into their home (where the church met) to explain to him the way of God more adequately (18:26). I noted that there is not much evidence in the Scriptures that Jesus spent a lot of time in any one-on-one relationships. The same is true of the church, or at least little is said about one-on-one discipling. We must remember, though, that an important hermeneutical principle is that simply because a practice is not mentioned in Scripture does not mean it did not happen. And it would seem from the possible examples in Acts that those who did the discipling thought and acted strategically, spending their time with those who were or would be key leaders in the church, such as Paul, Apollos, Silas, John Mark, and others.

Regardless, there are several ways that our churches could effectively minister to their people one-on-one. I made the point in chapter 4 that each Christian must take responsibility for his or her own spiritual growth as one of Christ’s disciples. The church could complement and enhance this by providing mature believers as counselors or mentors who at the very least help new believers and members map out an initial, personal program tailor-made for their growth. This could take place as part of or subsequent to a new members class. The church might also have a group of these mature people who are regularly available to work for a limited period of time with anyone who is interested in maturing in the faith. And this could be regularly announced in the various services of the church. This would not

only help individual members who are just beginning their spiritual growth development, but it would also give a wonderful opportunity of service for those in the church who are further along in their development. Willow Creek Community Church discovered that these more mature believers were some of the least satisfied people in the church because they were not being used to minister to others. And I suspect that their discovery is true of many in North American churches. I know of few churches that are practicing such one-on-one approaches using their more mature, but often dissatisfied, believers, and I do not understand why more are not offering discipleship help. One of my purposes for writing this book is to encourage the approach of using mature believers to disciple the less mature.

In summary, as we compare the church's methods of discipleship with those of Jesus, we see that they were very similar. Whether this was intentional is not clear, but there is continuity, not discontinuity, between the two. The church did not attempt to blaze new trails with its methodology, and this should be instructive when we consider the methodology we use in our churches.

The Church's Methods for Making Disciples

The church (Peter) preached to the crowds (large groups).

The church met in large houses (medium-sized groups).

The church met in smaller houses (small groups).

The church ministered one-on-one (individually).

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Some believe that the church's message and practice of disciple making were different from those of Jesus. Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not?

2. Was the church's audience different from Jesus's audience? If so, how so? How would you explain this?

3. How would you explain the similarities between Jesus's discipleship teaching and that of the church? What do we learn from this? How might this teaching be incorporated into your church's disciple-making process?

4. What impact does the Holy Spirit's ministry have on disciple making? How important is he to the process? The disciples were different in Acts than in the Gospels. They were much bolder and stronger in their faith. Could the presence of the Holy Spirit be a possible explanation for the difference?

5. Why do you think there are so few examples of one-on-one discipleship in the Scriptures? What might this suggest about how and whom we disciple?

Part 2

The Process *for* Making Mature Disciples

With Jesus's and the church's message and methods for making disciples in mind, you as a concerned leader in your church, whether a pastor, staff person, or teacher, are ready to design a clear strategy for making mature disciples. First, you will determine what a mature disciple would look like in your church context. This will explain why you do what you do—your church's primary ministries. Second, you will evaluate and work with your current primary ministries that are in place to make disciples. Third, you will develop a way to measure your progress in making disciples. Fourth, you will address how to staff your church to make disciples. Finally, you will discover how to develop a church budget to make this happen.¹

¹ Aubrey Malphurs, [*Strategic Disciple Making: A Practical Tool for Successful Ministry*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009), 73.