THE TASK

Each generation has emphasized different aspects of Christianity. Some eras have emphasized doctrine, others piety. Some have seen true Christianity as organized institutions, while others reacted and sought de-centralized systems of power. Still others have seen their faith manifested in bloodshed and martyrdom, while others see their faith online and spread by satellite technology. Some generations have wanted to be the hands of Christ, serving the poor and needy, while others were moved to become the feet of Christ, entering territories that the church dared not venture into aforetime.

Whether it’s wearing a Christian T-shirt or identifying with religious images and slogans, each generation has seen new creative expressions of Christianity as well as restoring and reviving the virtues of the past. While this ebb and flow of trends and ideas is inevitable, it is also just as important a task for the Christian to find that which is core.

Regardless of trend or time period, whether institutionally loyal or individualistically minded, every Christian needs to follow Jesus personally, to become His disciple, and to discover what discipleship means on a daily basis. This is the most basic interaction between Christ and Christian, among Christians, and within Christianity. Handed down from one person to another starting from two millennia ago, the art of Christian discipleship has kept the movement of Jesus alive and the gospel spreading from person to person, and from age to age. It is in this discipleship context that the teachings of Jesus, the work of the church, lifestyle commitments and habits, and the evangelistic spread of the gospel all take place.
Write out Matthew 28:16–20 from the translation of your choice. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, or outline or mind map the chapter.
In the last passage of the Gospel of Matthew, the Great Commission is delivered on a mountain. Claiming power in heaven and earth, this last passage is grandiose and awe-inspiring. Power is promised, and the promise is powerful. Christ's disciples are not left alone until the end of time and of the world. Surely the spread of Christianity to the majority of the world can be attributed to these words.

The passage also contains many verbs that have inspired gospel workers throughout the ages. Actions like “go,” “make,” “baptize,” and “teach” comprise the main actions of ministry. With decreeing overtones, our Commanding Officer, who has been granted all authority in heaven and earth, has given us His primary directive with these four verbs.

When translated into English, the four verbs seem equivalent. However, only one of them is the main verb, while the other three share an object. Called participles, the three are not the focus of action in the passage; rather, they help the main verb. The three participles modify, describe, and assist how the primary verb is to be accomplished. Which of the four do you think is where the central action takes place?

Though it is the first verb, and often thought of as the most active, “go” in this verse is a participle. Rather than an imperative command, it can be better understood as “as you are going.” Though baptisms are a pivotal ceremony in the life of the church, in this passage it is also a participle. Again, it could be reworded as “as you are baptizing.” The same can be said for the last verb of “teaching.” The primary verb is “make disciples.”

First, Christ’s disciples must “go.” We must go as much to difficult areas for missions as to easier places, regardless of inconvenience. In other words, Christian discipleship is an active one that requires movement, drive, dynamicity, development, progress, travel, and advancement. Second, Christ’s disciples must “baptize.” More than a ceremony, this ordinance demarcates the formal beginning of a discipleship walk with Jesus Christ. Having declared a death to self, the new man is reborn and sustained by the Holy Spirit to live a godly life. Third, Christ’s disciples must “teach.” Not some esoteric society, Christianity is composed of teachings from Christ about life, the world, time, humanity, salvation, and purpose. These things must be learned, experienced, and passed on to others.

These three actions are not minimized in anyway, but they are placed in relation to the main verb of “make disciples.” The primary goal of the Great Commission is to make disciples. This is done is by the aforementioned “going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” This trio of verbs explains the methodology, or “how” the primary verb is to be accomplished. While more can be said on the trio, the idea of making disciples and discipleship in general is the focus of the Great Commission.
LIKE BEGETS LIKE

Christ spoke the Great Commission to the disciples in Matthew 28:19, instructing His disciples to make more disciples. Surpassing books He could have written, powerful sermons He could have preached, or institutions of learning He could have founded, Christ invested in individuals. As such, the primary instruments of discipleship are not books, sermons, or classes; they are people.

Among the many objectives that Christ's humanity had to accomplish, the incarnation manifested the phenomenon of a human being making a disciple of another human being. As Christ is about to depart and ascend in the last chapter of Matthew, He then gives the mandate for His disciples to make disciples.

Though this seems like a simplistic point, it is quite crucial. The implications are that every human being who claims to be a follower of Christ must also be in the business of making disciples. This was not a special task relegated to Christ and His immediate circle of leaders. Discipleship was to involve every follower of Christ.

Before getting into the actual elements of discipleship in the coming weeks, we must establish a couple of presuppositions of discipleship. First, discipleship is premised upon human relationships. Rather than sermons or church attendance, it is interaction between two people, which was Christ's personal method. Though vital information is transmitted through preaching, there is something about the personal relationship that transcends the mere transference of information.

“There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen” (The Ministry of Healing, 143).

“The Lord desires that His word of grace shall be brought home to every soul. To a great degree this must be accomplished by personal labor. This was Christ's method” (Christ's Object Lessons, 229).

The second premise is that discipleship does not happen by chance. It requires time, effort, and an excellent level of intentionality. Often spiritual matters and spiritual work are ambiguous and considered not worthy of our effort and energy, yet discipleship presupposes diligence and responsibility. If Christ exerted His all for souls, shouldn't we, as His disciples, do that as well?

“Too often the work is left in an unfinished state, and in many such cases it amounts to nothing. Sometimes, after a company of people has accepted the truth, the minister thinks that he must immediately go to a new field; and sometimes, without proper investigation, he is authorized to go. This is wrong; he should finish the work begun; for in leaving it incomplete, more harm than good is done. No field is so unpromising as one that has been cultivated just enough to give the weeds a more luxuriant growth...

“Unless those who receive the truth are thoroughly converted, unless there is a radical change in the life and character, unless the soul is riveted to the eternal Rock, they will not endure the test of trial... God’s work is not to be done in a bungling, slipshod manner. When a minister enters a field, he should work that field thoroughly.” (Evangelism, p. 322)
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Romans 6:3–10
1 Thessalonians 1:5–7
Mark 8:34–38
1 Peter 5:2, 3

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with discipleship and people?

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father” (John 14:12). Christ was the ultimate model mentor. Everything He expected His disciples to do, He did. The disciples learned to pray by listening to Jesus pray. They learned the importance of Scripture by seeing how Jesus depended on the Scriptures. They learned to love by seeing love in action in the life and ministry of Jesus. They learned to teach the truth by watching the Master Teacher. Jesus Himself stated, “For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:15).

The example that started with Christ was handed down from disciple to disciple, from master to follower, from mentor to mentee. More than programs, courses, or philosophies, the instruments of discipleship are people. What better way to instill the principles of Christ-like living than being incarnated as a human being to show a living example.

This wasn’t for Christ alone. Paul picks up this motif when he says, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern” (Phil. 3:17). New disciples learn what it means and how to follow Christ by following the example of others, including us! “Let the teachers lead the way in working among the people, and others, uniting with them, will learn from their example. One example is worth more than many precepts” (The Ministry of Healing, 149). A living example is more powerful in making disciples than are our words.

The quality of new disciples is limited by the quality of the examples they are following. Jesus mentions in Matthew 23:15, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” Discipleship is not always a positive spiritual trajectory; it can also be an ungodly one. In this case, the Pharisees made their disciples twice as hypocritical as themselves! A principle to extract from this passage is that disciples rarely rise higher than the mentors who lead them.

In the process of following Christ, the first step to establish good discipleship is to find, train, and/or be good mentors. This dynamic is found in 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul says, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” Do you see the flow? It starts from Paul who makes a disciple of Timothy, who makes disciples of “faithful men,” who make disciples of “others.” Through it all, Christ is inspiring the discipleship through the Holy Spirit, and Christ is the ultimate example they are following.

In all our going, baptizing, teaching, preaching, training, soul-winning, and “churching,” we must impress everyone with this essential truth: every Christ-following disciple is to lead souls to Christ and be a disciple-maker. Discipleship from Christ embraces all and includes all. Every disciple should be trained to invest time and personal ministry in others—leading and mentoring as Christ did. This was His mission. This should be our mission. If embraced, “one soul, won to the truth, will be instrumental in winning others, and there will be an ever-increasing result of blessing and salvation” (Christian Service, 121).
Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the chapter, what personal applications are you convicted of in your life?

What practical applications must you make in your school, family, workplace, and church?

In Christlike sympathy we should come close to men individually, and seek to awaken their interest in the great things of eternal life. Their hearts may be as hard as the beaten highway, and apparently it may be a useless effort to present the Saviour to them; but while logic may fail to move, and argument be powerless to convince, the love of Christ, revealed in personal ministry, may soften the stony heart, so that the seed of truth can take root. . . .

“By personal labor reach those around you. Become acquainted with them. Preaching will not do the work that needs to be done. Angels of God attend you to the dwellings of those you visit. This work cannot be done by proxy. Money lent or given will not accomplish it. Sermons will not do it. By visiting the people, talking, praying, sympathizing with them, you will win hearts. This is the highest missionary work that you can do. To do it, you will need resolute, persevering faith, unwearying patience, and a deep love for souls.” . . .

“With the calling of John and Andrew and Simon, of Philip and Nathanael, began the foundation of the Christian church. John directed two of his disciples to Christ. Then one of these, Andrew, found his brother, and called him to the Saviour. Philip was then called, and he went in search of Nathanael. These examples should teach us the importance of personal effort, of making direct appeals to our kindred, friends, and neighbors. There are those who for a lifetime have professed to be acquainted with Christ, yet who have never made a personal effort to bring even one soul to the Saviour. They leave all the work for the minister. He may be well qualified for his calling, but he cannot do that which God has left for the members of the church. . . .

“There are many who need the ministration of loving Christian hearts. Many have gone down to ruin who might have been saved, if their neighbors, common men and women, had put forth personal effort for them. Many are waiting to be personally addressed. In the very family, the neighborhood, the town where we live, there is work for us to do as missionaries for Christ. If we are Christians, this work will be our delight. No sooner is one converted than there is born within him a desire to make known to others what a precious friend he has found in Jesus. The saving and sanctifying truth cannot be shut up in his heart.” . . .

“Salt must be mingled with the substance to which it is added; it must penetrate and infuse in order to preserve. So it is through personal contact and association that men are reached by the saving power of the gospel. They are not saved in masses, but as individuals. Personal influence is a power. We must come close to those whom we desire to benefit.” . . .

“Jesus saw in every soul one to whom must be given the call to His kingdom. He reached the hearts of the people by going among them as one who desired their good. He sought them in the public streets, in private houses, on the boats, in the synagogue, by the shores of the lake, and at the marriage feast. He met them at their daily vocations, and manifested an interest in their secular affairs. He carried His instruction into the household, bringing families in their own homes under the influence of His divine presence. His strong personal sympathy helped to win hearts.”

(*Christian Service*, p. 117–119)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

- How does one differentiate the core from the peripheral in Christianity?
- Which of the participles are easiest? Hardest? Why?
- Why does God use people as instruments of discipleship?
- How do you, personally, and how does your church, corporately, “make disciples”?
- Why are personal effort and time so precious in discipleship?
- How was Christ your personal example this week? How was He your personal Lord and Master this week?