FULL CIRCLE

In this series of studies, we have looked at the various components of discipleship: the primary instruments of discipleship (people); the end goal of discipleship (Christlikeness); the spiritual power of discipleship (prayer, witnessing, and Bible study); the systematic process of discipleship (preparing, planting, cultivating, harvesting, and preserving); the central role of the church in discipleship; and the vital role of individual self-denial in discipleship.

Now we come back full circle to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18–20. This time, we note that the word and the concept of all is repeated. It turns out that each of these phrases are ingredients for a healthy church:

1. Go. The participle in the Greek is plural where Christ’s command can be understood as addressed to all of His disciples throughout all time. A healthy church will go.

2. All Nations. Christ opens the gospel to all nations, tribes, tongues, and peoples. A healthy church aims to reach all people.

3. All Things. Jesus taught many things. His disciples are commanded to teach not most of them but all of these things. A healthy church needs a strategy and a plan to teach people to observe all the that Jesus taught.

4. All Authority. Christ has been given full ability and jurisdiction to accomplish His will. A healthy church taps into Christ’s means of fulfilling His command.

5. Always. The presence of Christ’s Spirit will dwell with us until the end of time, according to the promise. A healthy church needs and understands the timeline in which they are working and serving.
Write out Colossians 1:9–20 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out Col. 1:15–20. You may also re-write the passage in your own words, outline, or mind-map the chapter.
Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

Circle repeated words/ phrases/ideas

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you

Draw Arrows to connect words/ phrases to other associated or related words/phrases

What special insights do your marks seem overall to point to?

Memorize your favorite verse in Colossians 1:9–20. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

What initially prevented Philip, Ananias, and Peter in the book of Acts from reaching “all nations”? 

How are you reaching all nations? What could prevent us today, from reaching all nations?

ANTIBABEL: REACHING ALL NATIONS

While we live in a multicultural, internationalized world today, it could be argued that the early church, almost two thousand years ago, was just as transcultural. Acts 13:1 records members of the Antioch church who were from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. It was in Antioch that the term “Christians” was coined (Acts 11:26). Moreover, Luke intentionally points to the international “all nations” phrase of Christ’s great commission in the very structure of the book of Acts.

Acts 1:8 serves as a sort of table of contents, where Jerusalem is mentioned first, then Judea and Samaria, and finally, the ends of the earth. The action in the book of Acts follows this trajectory. The acts of the church happening in Jerusalem are mentioned first, then the Spirit guides the church to Judea and Samaria. When persecution erupts, the church then explodes missionally to different parts of the earth. Significantly, Luke places the following three testimonies right before the explosion that launches stage three. Acts 8 mentions the work of Philip in reaching the Ethiopian. Acts 9 records the testimony of Saul, along with Ananias’s connection to his conversion. Acts 10 revolves around Peter’s outreach to the Gentile believer Cornelius.

At first glance, these may seem like mere chronological testimonies. But when compared with the book of Genesis’ account of the Tower of Babel, they present striking parallels.

After the Noah narrative of Genesis 6–9, chapter 10 chronicles the descendants of the three sons of Noah: Japheth, Ham, and Shem. Chapter 11 then narrates the story of the Tower of Babel that resulted in God creating new languages and scattering the people throughout the earth. In chapter 12 the Abrahamic story begins with Abram’s call to the mission of blessing “all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3). The families referenced here are those that were established a couple of chapters earlier—from the three sons of Noah.

What is happening in Acts is a partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant that, through the new Israel, the church, or Christ’s body, the effects of the Tower of Babel will be undone and eradicated. Whereas the Tower of Babel narrative started the course of different languages, the Pentecostal meeting of Acts 2 reversed the many languages, so that now humanity could understand each other. Whereas the three sons of Noah were scattered throughout the earth, the church under Christ’s great commission was in the process of bringing them back together again: the son of Ham from Ethiopia, the son of Shem named Saul, and the son of Japheth named Cornelius of Italy. God used His disciples, Phillip, Ananias, and Peter, to reach and call all nations back to being His children through Christ.
TROUBLESHOOTING THE DISCIPLESHIP PROCESS

This quarter’s lessons have been comprehensive in addressing the different components of discipleship, and this requires an assessment of whether we are involved in all of them. It is one thing to learn about the theory of each step, but it is quite another to evaluate whether each step is done well or not. We must consider our strengths and/or weaknesses in each phase.

Do we truly see people as the primary instruments of discipleship, or are we focused on programs? Is the goal of discipleship to be Christ-like, or is it numerical growth? Do we really have communion with God? Are we breathing, eating, and working out with Jesus, or do we have an artificial relationship? Is the discipleship process a natural cycle, or is church the same yesterday, today, and forever? Is the church really training fishers of souls? And where is self-denial taking place in our daily walk with Christ?

The key is to recognize that every phase of soul-winning and discipleship is essential. After evaluation, we must strengthen every phase, always aiming for full synchrony. This is especially the case in the Grow cycle. Growth is sequential, and steps cannot be skipped. Discipleship training is continuous, building from the previous step. Similar to a biological system such as a muscle, if the church is not growing spiritually and numerically, it is dying spiritually and numerically. Discipleship training should be cyclical, repeating and multiplying as it goes through the process.

Every church has different strengths and weaknesses, and troubleshooting should take place to help each scenario. For example, Church A is very busy. It holds cooking seminars, Vacation Bible School, and evangelistic meetings every year. It also has an active community service center and a mentorship program for new members. Why is it not growing as much as it could?

While holding many church events, Church A is weak in the vital aspect of personal witnessing through literature and consistent Bible studies. Without these, it will experience modest growth at best. In other words, it can prepare, harvest, and prepare, but no planting or cultivating is going on.

In another example, Church B holds an evangelistic series every autumn and baptizes new members. Within two years, however, most of these members have no involvement in the church or have left the church altogether. What can be done to help Church B?

Church B is making church members but falling short of making disciples. It needs an intentional plan to train new members into active and spiritually grounded laborers in God’s cause. Again, the harvesting is successful, but no preservation is planned for.

In the last example, the members of Church C share literature and give Bible studies. They also have an intentional plan for mentoring new members, but very few interests actually become baptized members of the church. What can Church C do to grow?

Church C has failed to build trust by ministering to the health and other needs of the community. It also fails to capitalize on the power of public evangelistic meetings to harvest decisions for Christ, including baptism. Although planting, cultivating, and preserving are good, little cultivation or harvest happens.

In the end, a true marker of a healthy church is not how many people come in to visit but how many people are sent out to minister!
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Colossians 2:6–10; 3:8–11
Ephesians 4:11–16
Matthew 22:36–40
Romans 8:28, 31, 32

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Colossians 1:9–20?

Review your memorized verse from Colossians 1:9–20.
Colossians 1 is one of the most profound and sublime chapters of the New Testament. Paul seems limited in words to talk about the divinity of Christ. In verse 9, he starts the section on the preeminence of Christ by describing His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding. In verse 11, Paul continues the theme of all when describing Christ’s might and patience. Though the apostle does not use the word all, his use of the ideas of light, darkness, love, and sin bring out the comprehensiveness of Christ’s salvation.

Paul then pens a great Christocentric hymn, in which Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature” (Col. 1:15). Jesus is the best reflection of divinity and the best representation of all humanity. All things were created by Him and for Him. Christ is He who made and that which creations were made for. All things come after Him and all things are sustained by Him! Jesus is the Head of the church on earth and the fullness of the Godhead in heaven. And by Him all things are resolved.

What else can be said about Christ? He is the first of all things! He made all things! He solves all things! Paul’s point is that his readers should be speechless. There is no issue, no problem, no dispute, no difficulty, not obstruction that is not included in all things. What is to be our response to this? Nothing but speechless praise.

Undoubtedly, this quarter’s lessons on discipleship have addressed many areas of the individual’s spiritual life and church life where problems may abound. But at the end of the day, we are to bow our heads before the “firstborn over all creation” and surrender our scenarios, episodes, narratives, our lives over to Him, allowing victory in all things. Beyond church growth, discipleship programs, and objectives of evangelism, the simple question must be answered: Have we made Jesus Christ the Lord of all things?
“Paul well knew how his message would be regarded by both the Jews and the Greeks of Corinth. . . .

“But to Paul the cross was the one object of supreme interest. Ever since he had been arrested in his career of persecution against the followers of the crucified Nazarene he had never ceased to glory in the cross. At that time there had been given him a revelation of the infinite love of God, as revealed in the death of Christ; and a marvelous transformation had been wrought in his life, bringing all his plans and purposes into harmony with heaven. From that hour he had been a new man in Christ. He knew by personal experience that when a sinner once beholds the love of the Father, as seen in the sacrifice of His Son, and yields to the divine influence, a change of heart takes place, and henceforth Christ is all and in all” (The Acts of the Apostles, 245).

“Christ promised the gift of the Holy Spirit to His church, and the promise belongs as much to us as to the first disciples. But like every other promise, it is given on conditions. There are many who profess to believe and claim the Lord’s promises; they talk about Christ and the Holy Spirit; yet they receive no benefit, because they do not surrender their souls to the guidance and control of divine agencies.

“We cannot use the Holy Spirit; the Spirit is to use us. Through the Spirit, God works in His people ‘to will and to do of his good pleasure’ (Phil. 2:13). But many will not submit to be led. They want to manage themselves. This is why they do not receive the heavenly gift. Only to those who wait humbly upon God, who watch for His guidance and grace, is the Spirit given. The promised blessing, claimed by faith, brings all other blessings in its train. It is given according to the riches of the grace of Christ, and He is ready to supply every soul according to the capacity to receive. . . .

“Christ promised that the Holy Spirit should abide with those who wrestle for victory over sin, to demonstrate the power of divine might by endowing the human agent with supernatural strength and instructing the ignorant in the mysteries of the kingdom of God” (God’s Amazing Grace, 212).

“God calls upon His people to prepare themselves for scenes of severe conflict. Take up your duties in a meek and lowly spirit. Ever face your enemies in the strength of Jesus. Discharge with faithfulness every duty. Realize that you must now obtain by daily conversion and humility an unquestioning trust in the One who has all power and who will not leave you to be destroyed. You may know Christ by personal experience. . . . In the trials of these last days Christ will be made unto His people wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. . . . They are to develop an experience that will be a convincing power in the world. . . .

“What wonderful lessons we shall learn as the result of depending constantly on the sufficiency of Christ. He who is learning these lessons need not depend on another’s experience. He has the witness in himself, and his experience is the actual knowledge that Christ is all-sufficient, faithful, and powerful. He has the realization of the promise, ‘My grace is sufficient for thee’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). ‘God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able’ (1 Corinthians 10:13)” (In Heavenly Places, 297).
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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.

What was the most memorable point in your study of the topic of discipleship? What was the most difficult?

Which of Christ’s “all” statements in the Great Commission stand out for you?

Why do some churches prefer to reach “some nations” instead of “all nations”?

How can assessing our discipleship be done more effectively and more frequently?

Which of the five stages of the Grow cycle are weakest in your local church? Strongest? How can this be rectified?

When Scripture is too sublime, how can we make it more accessible?

In your personal life, what have you kept from Him that means you have not given Him “all”? Does God have “all” of you?