

The Great Commission – Myth or Mandate?

¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ 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, ²⁰ 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 28:18-20 (NIV84)

Jesus spoke these words from the Great Commission to his students. He shared them before ascending back to heaven to be with His Father. Shortly after His ascension, Jesus knew His followers would be indwelt with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. He charged them with changing the world through one simple process—making and multiplying disciples for Christ.

As a noun in Greek, mathétēs (math-ay-tes') is often translated "*disciple*," meaning a learner or pupil. We become disciples by learning and growing in God's Word through the guidance of others who emulate what it means to become more like Christ. One picture we might have of a disciple of Christ is someone who, having responded to God's call, moves into a saving relationship with Him through faith, and begins the journey to actively seek to become like Him - engaging His Word and assimilating His teaching into their daily lives allowing Christ to be their master.

"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master." (Matthew 10:24-25)

Our great goal in becoming disciples is to be like our master. In our faith walk, no matter how far we advance as disciples, we will always remain a student of our master. Our Master is not merely a man who has walked the path longer than his disciples have; He is God Incarnate – the embodiment of all truth, wisdom, and righteousness. Jesus said:

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ." (Matthew 23:8-10)

David Mathis, executive editor at desiringGod.org, shares, "Each of us can only go so deep with Jesus when we engage Him on our own. To grow as true Disciples of Christ, we must begin to desire to learn alongside others and to reach out to others. When your life in Him is healthy and vibrant, you will not only yearn to know the Father by growing deep roots in the rich soil of His Word, but you will also desire to grow upward and outward extending your branches out and bearing the fruit of His goodness to help others grow as well. Not only does going deep with Jesus soon lead us to reach out to others, but also reaching out to others sends us deeper with Him."

We come alive as God uses us to make a difference in the life of someone else. When we begin to live on mission loving others, we also start to see His grace shine in our time in His word, in prayer, and in fellowship. So how can we see the Great Commission as our mandate to connect with others sharing the Gospel, and in doing so – move away from the myths and lies we sometimes buy into about Christ's intentions, purpose and promise.

Joey Shaw, global disciple making practitioner and author of “*All Authority: How the Authority of Christ Upholds the Great Commission*” shares some of the most common myths of the Great Commission that you and I may buy into from time-to-time throughout our spiritual journeys.

- Myth 1: Making disciples is simply great advice
- Myth 2: Jesus wants converts not disciples
- Myth 3: Becoming a Disciple just happens
- Myth 4: Only when I am ready and able, then I will start making disciples
- Myth 5: God’s mandate doesn’t include crossing our comfort zones

Let us explore together how these myths could negatively influence our mission at St. Timothy’s. Our mission to equip and empower people to have an eternal impact in the lives of others for the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us better understand how these myths can hinder each one of our journeys to Know the Father, Grow as Disciples of Jesus, and Go with Spirit in our community.

Myth 1: Making disciples is simply great advice.

Today’s cultural leaders would love to have us buy into the myth that the Great Commission is merely great *advice*. The truth of the matter remains that the Great Commission is a *commandment from* Christ and a commissioning *by* Christ. Jesus said, “**If you love me, you will obey what I command.**” (John 14:15) Jesus shares the same truth further in John 3:36, “**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life.**” We can see clearly through these verses that the measure of our love for Christ is in direct proportion to our loving response and obedience to Him!

Jesus gives us the “*great*” command of the Great Commission. In fact, it is really the only command in Matthew 28:18-20. The words “*go,*” “*teaching,*” and “*baptizing*” merely serve to explain how He plans for us to fulfill His command. The end goal of living on mission is not going, teaching, or even baptizing, but making disciples! Therefore, regardless of your passion or sacrifice to love the Lord and to serve Him, your efforts will prove empty if you are not being obedient to make disciples.

You cannot love Jesus and not obey him. More directly, you cannot discard or even discount the Great Commission and at the same time assert that you love Jesus. His command for you, and for me, is simple—go and make disciples.

Myth 2: Jesus wants converts not disciples

Do we sometimes pursue the Gospel, by trying to “convert” others to our Christian faith? If we truly understand Christ and his commissioning, we quickly realize He never directs us to make converts of others – those who leave behind one religion and take up Christianity. Not in the least, we are to make followers of Jesus. Knowing the difference between convert making and disciple making is essential to our spiritual growth. Converts are seeking to swap religious doctrines. Disciples are seeking a relationship with a rabbi, a teacher. Converts follow a belief system. Disciples follow a person providing them with a purpose. Converts grasp for rituals. Disciples engage to learn a life of renewal. Converts react with cultural conformity. Disciples respond in relational transformation.

Are you making converts or are you making disciples? One way to answer this question is to evaluate your relationships with unbelievers. What do you feel when you share the Gospel with others and they blatantly reject it? If you are offended by their rejection, perhaps you are too interested in “being right” and in making a convert rather than coming alongside to grow a disciple. Jesus motivated others to move away from disbelief by showing his love and compassion for them. He never demonstrated a desire merely to prove himself “right” and “create a convert.”

Another way of discovering if you are making converts or disciples is to evaluate whether those you lead to faith in Jesus Christ continue to grow. As a disciplemaker, we fix our eyes on the goal of helping others finish well. As a convert maker, we focus our attention on the outcome of achieving a conversion. Do you lose focus on your disciples after their conversion, leaving behind any consideration for spiritual growth? If so, you must search your heart maybe your interest lies in building your cadre of converts.

Myth 3: Becoming a Disciple just happens

Many Christians think, consciously or unconsciously, that we can make disciples without changing anything in our daily lives; that as we go about doing our own thing, disciples will be made almost accidentally. Have any of us ever made statements like these? “I will just go about my day to day business and if someone asks me about the Christ, then I will share the Gospel.” Or, “I will just enjoy life with others then when they see how I reflect a renewed hope in my life, I will simply pray they become interested in knowing why, then I can share Jesus and my reason for hope with them.”

For many of us, we may be willing to share the Gospel, but only if opportunities easily come our way. We wait for God to bring us the picture-perfect moment to share the Gospel or demonstrate Christ at work in our lives. The myth we begin to buy-into is that simply “doing life” with others is enough for us to make disciples.

We can see a bit of truth in this myth, but it falls short. Living your life with others is a part of how God will use your gifts to make disciples, but without an intentional pursuit of exploring His Word and praying together, just doing life with others will not alone lead to making and multiplying disciples.

The ministry of Jesus is a great example. Jesus did life with others. Every step of the way he prayed, planned, and pursued with purpose the growth and transformation of his followers. Jesus showed us throughout His ministry the intentionality of His life. Christ did not just randomly select His 12 disciples. He spent all night in prayer seeking His Father’s will. He carefully, strategically and prayerfully developed his followers along the way. He modeled for us the desired process for how to make disciples.

If we press further reading “**Therefore go**” in verse 19, we must recognize the Greek text of the Great Commission conveys intentionality. This phrase is a passive participle that implies “*as you are going*.” This conveys a deliberate action that we are to engage, in order to achieve “making disciples.” Christ commands us “as we are going” to have the resoluteness of purpose to live out His calling in our daily lives. Jesus commands us today to set our eyes on the goal of disciple making and pursue that goal with tenacious perseverance. We need to be actively praying and planning to make disciples!

Myth 4: Only when I am ready and able, then I will start making disciples.

Have you ever told yourself that you do not have the capability to make disciples. That you somehow are lacking training, experience, or skill. That making disciples is something only a “super” Christian could do. Something only “mature” Christian could undertake.

The truth is Jesus was commanding his followers. Most of the early apostles were unlearned and lower/middle class. He called them to go to every conceivable people group on earth to multiply His disciples. He called them to raise up followers of a Person, Christ, one who is physically unseen, no longer of our world. Jesus knew He was ascending to heaven. Yet, he left this command in the hands of the completely inconceivable (and in some ways incapable)!

We have to believe that Jesus knew the gravity of this command. Why? He backs up His commandment with two powerful promises – He gave His followers His authority and His omnipresence. Matthew 28:18, “**Then Jesus came to**

them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Matthew 28:20b, *"And surely I am with you always"* In the Great Commission, Jesus gives a command along with a promise of His power and presence.

For any of us to put off the practice of making disciples in our lives because we believe we need to be better equipped or grow spiritually stronger, represents nothing more than unbelief in God's promises! Each of us has the promise of Jesus' power and presence. Is that not good enough for us, for you and me, to begin the process of making disciples?

Sharing who we are with others means letting others getting close enough to experience life with us. David Mathis reminds us "In good discipling, we can demonstrate for our disciples something Jesus's disciples were able to see in each other: true repentance. Those who are looking to our lives and seeking to imitate our faith need to see us be honest and forthright about our sin, hear our confessions, witness our repentance, and watch us earnestly seek to change." We need to influence their life by showing how Christ transforms us through His Word just as the disciples who walked with Christ did. God shows us in Acts 4:13, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus".

Myth 5: Our mandate does not include crossing our comfort zones.

This myth convinces us that God only calls select people to live on mission and cross cultures, going outside our comfort zones in order to make disciples. As Joey Shaw reminds us, "the rest of us should only focus on people like us, in our culture. The problem with this myth is that the actual Great Commission commands otherwise. Incredibly, Jesus gave a commandment to his mostly *Jewish* audience to go to a mostly *Gentile* people and make disciples! Jesus commanded his Jewish followers to go to all people groups (all *ethnos*, the Greek word for "nations")." In other words, the Great Commission itself is a mandate to leave our comfort zones!

Furthermore, Shaw paints for us a picture, "the model of Jesus mandates crossing into other cultures. Jesus left his home (with the Father), his culture, his language, his people (the trinity) to come to our home (earth), to our people, to speak our language, to grow up in a Jewish culture, and so on. Jesus was a cross-cultural missionary and he commands us to follow in his steps, cross any boundary, live incarnationally and make disciples."

Concluding Points

Ask yourself, "Am I currently making disciples of others?" If you answer no, then why not ask yourself, "Will I today commit to Christ to begin the process of making disciples for Him?"

Good discipling is both *intentional* and *relational*. Our pursuit of making disciples needs to include being both strategic *and* a social aspect. This is life-on-life discipling. We begin to share ordinary life (relationship) and seek to initiate and make the most of teachable moments (intentionality). True Discipling is both organic and orchestrated, relational and intentional.

Discipling is the process in which a growing believer invests himself, for a determined length of time, into the life of one or just a few other believers, in order to help them grow in their faith — including helping them also to invest in others who will invest in others. You see - discipling is the stuff of Christian fellowship! Every believer, indwelt by God's Spirit, can be a channel of God's grace to another. In obedience, we can respond in love to Jesus' command to *"teach them to obey everything I have commanded you"* including, making disciples who make disciples.

This was PRIMARY focus of Jesus's "public ministry" — from the time he called to the twelve, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" ([Matthew 4:19](#)), He desired them to multiply and then he sent them out in His power and promise, "Go, and make disciples of all nations (ethnos)" ([Matthew 28:19](#)).

Spurred on by Christ's commissioning – His Mandate, I challenge you:

1. **Go** – First, Be obedient to Jesus' command and simply GO!! We will never make disciples if we are unwilling to go (whether across the aisle, across the street or across the globe).

2. **Make Disciples who Make Disciples** – God calls us to the Gospel. While we were not present at the issuance of the Great Commission, He called those who were present. They were faithful to obey Christ’s command to make disciples who make disciples. Here we are over 2000 years later; He calls us to do likewise. That means we are to make disciples who crave His Word and desire to spend time with Him.
3. **Be a Disciple** – We will never make disciple-making disciples if we are not first disciples ourselves. We must obey Christ’s command, “assured” He is with us. One memorable refrain I recall from one of our discipleship ministry leaders is “Think big, start small, go deep.”
Think big - God’s plan is to reach the world to give Him glory. Start small - each of us should focus on just one or two others. Go deep - invest more deeply in the lives of those one or two, showing them the power of God’s Word, prayer, fellowship, and accountability – equipping them to do the same in the lives of others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked us to recognize that there is a cost to discipleship that Christ asks of us: *“Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ. It remains an abstract idea, a myth which has a place for the Fatherhood of God, but omits Christ as the living Son. ... There is trust in God, but no following of Christ.”* **I ask you to take the card that was in your bibles and commit to pray for one person to disciple over the next year.** At St. Tim’s – each of us can play a small part in God’s great plan. We can be the world-changing impact of the Great Commission in one person’s life. We can do so in the simple stride of our everyday life. We can be intentional and relational in our discipling. *Think big, start small, go deep!* Envision the impact, Engage the few. Let’s pray - *Lord, I pray for You to open the door to a disciple...*