

Jesus' plan to save the world

redefining our definition of Jesus' call to follow Him

KEY TEXT—MATTHEW 4:19

RETHINKING WHAT WE THINK IS TRUE

When I was a teenager, I memorised Mark Twain's famous saying, "It's not what you don't know that gets us into trouble. It's what you know for sure—that isn't so." I am coming to the conclusion that this is particularly applicable to discipleship—a subject that I have devoted my life to during the last decade. To my own astonishment, it seems that after all this time, I have been defining discipleship incorrectly. The problem is that having a wrong definition of discipleship has serious implications for what God expects of me as a church leader, us as individual Christians, and us all as God's church.

HOW JESUS DEFINED DISCIPLESHIP

matthew's sandwich

Let me set the scene for you. The gospel of Matthew is sandwiched by the call to discipleship in Matthew 4:18-20 and the commissioning of the disciples in Matthew 28:18-20.

As one of the very beginning of His ministry, Jesus calls his first two disciples to follow Him (Matthew 4:18-20). Then at the very end of Matthew Jesus commissions these very same disciples to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).

what is a disciple?

Jesus' command is very clear—go and make disciples. What is not clear is what Jesus means by a disciple. So what is a disciple? And how do you know when you have made one?

To try and get our heads around what Jesus is talking about, look again at Jesus' own definition of a disciple contained within Matthew 4:19,

"Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people."

Here is our problem. I asked a group of church members to give me a definition of a disciple from this verse. They discussed this in small groups then came back and we discussed it in a large group. In 30 minutes, no-one was able to explain what was actually in the verse. They simply shared all the ideas that they had always thought discipleship to be.

If we stay with Jesus' own definition of a disciple from the verse something a little different emerges, which is this:

A disciple is someone who Jesus will train and send out to rescue people for God's Kingdom.

Before we look at this in more detail, look at Matthew 4:19 in terms of what Jesus' call to discipleship is not:

- Jesus' call to follow Him is not a call to be converted.
- Jesus' call to follow Him is not a call to membership of a new church.
- Jesus' call to follow Him is not a call to love Him more deeply.

Rather, the call to follow Jesus—to discipleship in Matthew 4:19—is based specifically on the invitation to become equipped to go out by themselves to reach lost people.

With this in mind go back to Jesus' very last words in Matthew 28:19 as He now commissions these newly equipped disciples,

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...

So let's ask a basic question—what is Jesus asking His disciples to do?

- Go and make disciples.
- What is a disciple? It is someone who is intentionally making other disciples.
- Therefore, Jesus is commanding His disciples to go and make disciples—who are people equipped to go and make more disciples. So Jesus' command is not primarily to convert but to equip disciples who can equip disciples.

example: Paul the disciple-maker

Notice this fascinating example of disciples making disciples in 2 Timothy 2:2. Paul the disciple-maker is encouraging his disciple, Timothy,

1 You then, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others.

Look at the four generations of disciples: 1—Paul, 2—discipling Timothy, 3—who is to entrust Paul's teaching to "reliable people who will also be qualified to teach...", 4—"...others" Paul is calling Timothy to make disciples who make disciples.

how would Jesus evaluate success?

If Jesus' call to discipleship is not primarily a call to conversion or membership but a call to make disciples who make disciples, then counting baptisms would have been a very distorted way to evaluate His success. Based on Jesus' own call to discipleship, success would not be measured by the amount of tithes or offerings brought in, or the number of baptisms, or the number of people in church for Sabbath programmes, but specifically on how many disciples are replicating Jesus' own ministry by making disciples who can make disciples.

IT'S ABOUT MULTIPLICATION

a method for multiplication (not addition)

Jesus' plan was based on multiplication, not addition. So what was Jesus' plan to multiply Himself? Consider this panoramic overview of Jesus' method to make disciples who make disciples in the gospel of Matthew, noting that this method of multiplication is very different from the method for addition. Jesus' method is important to apply because as one discipler said, Jesus' teaching separated from Jesus' methods will not have the same results.

1. **Jesus' call clearly defined His expectations—discipleship was to clearly to become equipped to become a missionary (Matthew 4:18-20) rather than be converted.** Jesus is not vague. He doesn't invite people under false pretences.
2. **Jesus poured His life into a few.** Jesus preached to the crowds, but he poured His life into 12. But specifically into 3—Peter, James and John. As someone who observed Jesus' method said, **"Think big [global]. Start small. Go deep."**
3. **Jesus only poured His life into people who were deadly serious about His mission.** Again, while Jesus preached to the crowds, He poured His energy into a band of fully devoted people. When people in the crowd wanted to join Him, if Jesus sensed they was not 100% committed, He exposed their lack of dedication, and they went home.
4. **Jesus was theologically and practice heavy.** When Jesus taught, He challenged His disciples with ideas and tasks that were paradigm shifting and forces them out of their comfort zone. He wasn't Christianity lite e.g. ministry and parables.
5. **Jesus gave tasks and then the disciples came back and debriefed,** e.g. parables and the problem of a demon possessed man. Mark 6:31. Jesus preached and healed. The disciples watched. Then they were sent out to preach and heal, and then came back to discuss what happened. In this learning community Jesus didn't ask the disciples to do something He wasn't doing.
6. **Jesus corrected and chastise His disciples using teachable moments** e.g. "You of little faith" (Matthew 8:26), "the spirit is willing but the body is weak" (Matthew 26:40-41).
7. **Jesus modelled godliness before His disciples, particularly compassion, dependence, humility, and obedience.** Jesus

did not teach theological theory because it was truth applied to life and character that attracted people to Him.

8. **Jesus focus was relationships not programmes.** Jesus primarily focused on people not meetings and programmes. He prioritised the **sharing of His life to shape another life.**
9. **Jesus' commission of the disciples clearly defined replication as the future mandate of their lives (Matthew 28:18-20).**

disciple-making math

Jesus' method to reach the world is based on multiplication not addiction. Both Jesus and Paul knew they had a limited time on earth, so the plan was to replicate themselves over and over and over again. Now consider the maths involved:

If I disciplined only 1 person a year, after 20 years I would have disciplined 20 people. But if everyone I disciplined poured their life into another, 1 a year, and those people did the same, and the next people did the same—just 1 person a year until the end of the same 20 years, a total of 1,048,576 would have been disciplined. And if I started with 2 people (=3^20 there would be 3,486,784,401 disciplined at the end of 20 years. And if I started with 3 people, and they disciplined 3 people who each disciplined 3 people, at the end of 20 years, 1,099,511,627,776 disciples.

MY RESPONSE

We have considered the very big picture of disciple-making where we need to take Jesus definition of discipleship seriously. To help us begin to apply this, Howard Hendricks suggests that every believer should foster three discipleship relationships in their life:

- **A Paul**—an older and wiser believer from whom you can learn
- **A Barnabas**—a friend who teaches, encourages, and holds you accountable
- **A Timothy**—a young believer [or believers] in whom you are investing

Which boils down to this simple question, who are you discipling and who is discipling you?

<div style="font-size: 2em; margin-bottom: 10px;">1</div> <p>LIFE POINT</p> <p>following Jesus is not primarily for personal edification</p>	<div style="font-size: 2em; margin-bottom: 10px;">2</div> <p>LIFE POINT</p> <p>a disciple is someone equipping others to reach lost people</p>	<div style="font-size: 2em; margin-bottom: 10px;">3</div> <p>LIFE POINT</p> <p>Jesus focused on multiplication not addition</p>	<div style="font-size: 2em; margin-bottom: 10px;">4</div> <p>LIFE POINT</p> <p>think big – start small go deep</p>
---	---	--	---