

Being—or making disciples? (a short theology of discipleship)

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DISCUSSION PAPER

SYNOPSIS: A unique aspect of discipleship is that our *being disciples* is dependent upon our involvement in *making disciples*. When churches decline, self-interest rules—with the building up of members becoming the priority. However, Jesus' movement involves new disciples *making disciples*—with participation the catalyst for spiritual growth and maturity. Churches filled with Christians who know they are called to *make disciples* will make an impact in our troubled world—and, will be the churches that prevail.

Canadian blogger Carey Nieuwhof has reignited the discussion over *being disciples* vs. *making disciples*—writing, “Jesus never asked you to *be* a disciple; he called you to *make* disciples.”¹

But really, the two cannot be separated.

A disciple is a *follower* or *learner* who grows more like Jesus the disciple-maker every day in every way—and the inter-relationship of *making* and *being* is unique.

Unfortunately, the idea of *being disciples* has become the fall-back position of many not actively engaged in disciple-making. It is a kind of post-conversion gradualism—a journey of personal spiritual growth (even of a lifetime) that might one day result in faith sharing, although most never get that far!

On the other hand, *making disciples* is the priority of movements—with all believers and leaders defined by their participation.

Jesus championed early involvement

Such early participation by new disciples in disciple-making seems counter-intuitive. We think new believers need to attend church and be built up until they can share their faith. But, Jesus did it differently.

He immediately involved new disciples in disciple-making—and, it is those making disciples who were called disciples. Involvement in disciple-making was a vital component of His process, critical to the development of character and spiritual maturity.

Jesus' immediately involved people

After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus called His first disciples at the Jordan River.

- **His first invitation, “*come and see*”—was experiential.** Simple and easy to replicate, Jesus modelled *making* and *being* a disciple. Responding to His call, “*Come and*

see”—inviting two of the Baptist’s disciples to where He was staying—Andrew and Philip spent a day with Him. They immediately called others—Andrew, his brother Peter; and Philip, his friend Nathaniel.

Even a short time with Jesus evokes participation in inviting others with the same invitation—“come and see,” to the same experience (John 1:39-46).

- **Jesus’ second invitation, “*follow me*”—was relational.** The next day, those who chose to walk with Him were called “his disciples” (John 1:43; 2:2). It doesn’t take long to become a disciple who makes disciples.

After time at a wedding in Cana and “a few days” at Capernaum (beside the lake) “with his mother and his brothers and his disciples” (John 2:2-12)—Jesus went to Jerusalem and Judea for 18 months. There He gained “more disciples than John,” with “his disciples” baptizing these many new disciples (John 3:22; cf., 4:1-2).

Immediate participation by new disciples characterised Jesus’ movement. Like the Samaritan woman, whom He met when returning from Jerusalem to Galilee, all new disciples were immediately engaged in making disciples. When she indicated her trust in Him, Jesus told her, “Go, call your husband and come back” (John 4:16). She had met Jesus and could go into Sychar calling, “*Come and see* a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” (John 4:29).

A disciple can tell of having met Jesus, and also extend the first disciple-making invitation to others, “*come and see.*”

- **Jesus’ third invitation, *fish with me*—was a call to participate.** Just as with physical exercise, participation in disciple-making cultivates spiritual strength. It is therefore not surprising that Jesus made this His priority. It could be called a spiritual law: participation in *making* disciples cultivates our *being* disciples.

Learning to fish for people

Having returned to Galilee to live in Capernaum, Jesus intensified the equipping of His disciples. Finding Peter and Andrew at the lakeside—as well as James and John, Jesus said, “Come, follow me”—“and I will show you how to fish for people” (Matthew 4:19 NLT).

He was not calling them for the first time, as the section heading in our Bibles wrongly suggests.² They already knew Jesus well. They had met him at the Jordan and chosen to *follow* as “his disciples.” They had been with Him when He performed His first miracle at Cana (John 2:2), witnessed His “zeal” in deconstructing Jerusalem’s Temple ceremonies (John 2:17), and were “surprized” by His boldness in inviting a Samaritan woman to be a disciple (John 4:27).

They had perhaps travelled back-and-forth between Jerusalem and their Capernaum homes, dividing their time between making and “baptizing” new disciples for Jesus in Judea and caring for their families and fishing activities in Galilee (John 3:22; 4:1-2). But

Jesus had more to teach them about fishing for people, and each time they gladly left what they were doing to learn from Him (Luke 5:1-11).³

Transformed by God's mission

In calling a despised Samaritan woman to be a disciple, in engaging with the centurion in Capernaum, and later taking His disciples to make disciples in pagan Decapolis and Phoenicia, Jesus shaped the hearts and lives of His disciples.

- **His fourth invitation, *love your enemies*—was sacrificial.** When selecting His twelve from “a large crowd of his disciples” (Luke 6:17), Jesus outlined His core values, saying: “Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! *In that way you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven*” (Matthew 5:44-45 NLT). This takes sacrifice—the crucifixion of self, seen in love for all others (Matthew 16:24; cf. John 13:34-35).
- **Jesus' fifth invitation, *receive the Spirit*—empowers.** Having accomplished all necessary for our salvation by His life, death and resurrection, Jesus affirmed, “‘As the Father has sent me, *I am sending you.*’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (John 20:21-22).

The same Spirit who anointed Jesus at His baptism, anoints new disciples at their baptisms—empowering and sending them for disciple-making. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8; cf. 2:1-4, 11, 38-39).

As His *body*, we are called to engage with His nature and mission. His commission resonates with our *being*, “Therefore go and *make disciples* of all *ethne* (tribes, languages or *relational streams*), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 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 28:19-20 NIV).

The future church

Participation in *making* disciples is the environment where our *being* as disciples is cultivated. It is a comprehensive, integrated, transformational journey of growth and learning. Our experiences (our hearts), decisions (our heads) and active participation (our hands) fully facilitate our deepest engagement with God's heart and mission.

Spirit empowerment and active participation in Christ's mission appeals to us. It inspires and challenges. Tired of slogans and routine programs, we want to engage with the *relational streams* of our communities, to *make disciples* and plant new faith groups to reach their colleagues, friends and families with the gospel.

Only those churches that equip, empower and release believers to use the simple, reproducible, anyone-can-do-it, no cost disciple-making methods of Jesus will have a future. Nieuwhof predicts, “The future church will be filled with Christians who realize they're called to make disciples, not just be disciples. Churches that help their congregation do this will prevail.”⁴

And, in *making disciples*—we know our lives will *be* changed.

NIV – except where indicated

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¹ Carey Nieuwhof, “Where is Future Church Attendance Heading? 10 Questions. 10 Hunches,” <https://careynieuwhof.com/where-is-future-church-attendance-heading-10-questions-10-hunches/>, 1 June 2020.

² The titles *The Calling of the First Disciples* (NIV) or *The First Disciples* (NLT) are misleading for Jesus had already called these disciples 18 months previously at the Jordan River (John 1:35-51).

³ Robert L Thomas and Stanley N Gundry (Editors), *The NIV Harmony of the Gospels*, HarperOne, 1988, page 57 for comment of the differences between the accounts of Matthew 4 (cf. Mark 1) and that of Luke 5.

⁴ Nieuwhof, op cit.