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Disciple making: *Jesus' five invitations*

Jesus spent three and a half years making disciples and then instructed them to do the same: “ ‘Go and make disciples’ ” (Matt. 28:19).¹ This is our commission: *to make disciples who make disciples for His kingdom movement*. Jesus followed a profoundly simple process, employing five invitations, each one followed by experiences and instructions. His invitations provide a frame for our task.

Come and see

John the Baptist was still at Bethany beyond the Jordan when Jesus approached. Just six weeks had gone by since Jesus had been baptized, and now He was back. Although He was exhausted² by His 40-day fast and Satan’s assault in the Judean desert, John recognized Him: “ ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!’ ” He knew Jesus was this One, for he had seen “ ‘the Spirit come down and remain’ ” on Him. John declared that he had come baptizing to reveal Him, and went on to say, “ ‘I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God’ ” (John 1:29–34).

The next day John drew the attention of two of his disciples to Jesus, repeating, “ ‘Look, the Lamb of God!’ ” They followed Jesus, asking, “ ‘Where are you staying?’ ” (vv. 36–38). Then Jesus extended His first recorded invitation, “ ‘Come and see’ ”—a simple invite

that turned their lives upside down. Consistent with the culture of the time, this was an invitation to spend time, enjoy food and drink, stay, and talk. They went and spent the rest of the day with Him (v. 39).

What was the focus of their conversation into that evening? John’s introduction of Jesus as “ ‘the Lamb of God’ ” and “ ‘the Son of God’ ” had piqued the interest of His guests. At the end of their visit, Andrew went straight to his brother Simon Peter, telling him, “ ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ)” (v. 41). The next day Philip told Nathanael, “ ‘We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote’ ” (v. 45).

While at that stage Jesus was unable to draw attention to His miracles or teachings, for He had not yet done either, He could point to the *preparation phase* of His life, “about thirty years” (Luke 3:23), comparing this with what the prophets had said about the promised Messiah. He could speak of His childhood, young adult years, baptism, and temptations; and for His guests this was entirely convincing. Those *preparation years* for the movement He had come to cultivate became the first phase of their preparation as disciples.

Those making disciples for Jesus Christ today can draw attention to the whole life and ministry of Jesus, not just the *preparation years*. But making

disciples still starts with the invitation “Come and see.” There is little gained in rushing over this experiential phase, for most of those with whom we engage have no background story of Jesus: who He is, where He lived, when He lived, the circumstances of His time, what He did, what He said, where He is, what He is doing now, or how He could possibly relate to them today. Before people can follow or obey Jesus, they will need to meet Him, spend time with Him, experience who He is. Further invitations do not make sense unless people have responded to the invitation to “come and see.”

Follow Me

Having spent the evening with Jesus, Andrew immediately went and brought his brother to Jesus (John 1:41, 42). The next day Jesus found Philip and said, “Follow Me.” This was His second invitation: first He had invited the two, “Come and see!” Now “Follow Me.”

Philip immediately went to Nathanael to tell him they had found the one foretold by the prophets, and He was “ ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph’ ” (John 1:45). Nathanael was skeptical. He came from the rival village over the hill to the north (John 21:2). He knew Nazareth, and the family of Joseph who lived there. There was nothing extraordinary about either. Philip repeated the words of Jesus, “ ‘Come and see’ ” (John 1:46)—the first

invitation towards discipleship. That day Jesus left for Cana, with His first disciples obeying His second invitation, “Follow Me!”

The next 18 months—spent in Judea, with visits into Galilee—could be called the *foundation phase* of Jesus’ ministry. During this time He invited people to *see* and *follow*. Jesus took His first disciples to Cana to celebrate a family wedding, generously blessing the festivities with His first miracle. Then it was to Jerusalem for Passover, confronting corruption at the very heart of Israel’s kingdom and initiating the deconstruction of the temple system. Hardly the role of one who might deliver Israel from Roman bondage! Nor did His night interview with the Pharisee Nicodemus appear to establish these credentials. But by the time He headed back to see John the Baptist, this time at Aenon near Salim on the borders of Samaria (John 3:22, 23), Jesus was “gaining and baptizing more disciples than John, although . . . it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples” (John 4:1, 2).

The foundations of a movement were being laid: His disciples did what disciples do, joining Jesus in making and baptizing disciples. This multiplying band of disciples was to learn that God’s kingdom encompasses cultural and national enemies: the woman of Samaria with her townspeople were welcome (vv. 1–42), along with Capernaum’s royal official (possibly a courtier of Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea) and his household (vv. 43–54).

Following Jesus can prove confronting. Accepted paradigms are challenged. Preconceived ideas and prejudices are accosted. Again, Jesus did not rush this phase of His movement building, for time does not matter as much as do relationships. Answering His call, “Follow Me!” draws the believer into this relational *foundation phase* of discipleship. During this phase Jesus gave His disciples a range of experiences, unexpected and inspiring opportunities—some embarrassing, even audacious!—that deepened their relationship with Him and their understanding of His kingdom. In making

disciples who make disciples, we must do the same.

Come fishing

Some of Jesus’ first disciples were fishermen. Philip, like Andrew and Peter, came from the Galilean village of Bethsaida. James and John were also involved in the fishing industry. While following Jesus, those like Peter, who had a wife and no doubt a family, cared for their families and maintained their businesses. There were hired men to supervise, bills to pay, and households to manage. Following Jesus is never done in a vacuum but on the paths of life.

Following His cousin’s imprisonment and His rejection in Jerusalem (John 5), Jesus relocated to Galilee (Matt. 4:12, 13). This was a time of major transition. A new season had come, a new phase of movement building. He made Capernaum in “Galilee of the Gentiles” the base for this nine-month *expanded outreach phase* of discipleship. In this region on the edge of Israel, with a diverse population, the royal

Into the night

Someone once said that youth is wasted on the young. When I was young, we youth had a lot on our minds: foreign wars that might involve us, an active round of self-indulgence, and for some, worries about grades and the future.

Then we began to hear of a revival that was sweeping through Adventist college campuses—other colleges, not mine. It remained an abstraction till one Sabbath that I remember well to this day.

A group of the revived youth came to town that weekend and gave the Sabbath sermon at my college church. They were a little awkward and not too rehearsed. But the urgency of their experience had an almost mesmerizing effect on all of

us, particularly those of a similar age. They spoke of regrets at living life for the moment, for the thrill alone, and for themselves only. They spoke of regret at harm they had inflicted on themselves, parents, and peers. They cried a lot. They smiled a lot, and they praised God that He had begun to change them and gave them joy.

That service lasted all morning and till midafternoon. By then the stage area was a milling crowd of mostly young people confessing their sins, asking their fellows for forgiveness, and exulting that God was present to take away the sins.

I left in a sort of awe, but slightly troubled that it may have only been a flashback guilt trip for most and gone by the next day for another experience.

I was wrong. For months, groups of young people met to pray—many praying all night for guidance and praising the Lord.

But it was an overheard conversation between two young men in a bank foyer down the street from the college that I most remember. It was many months after the revival Sabbath, so I was surprised to overhear the word *Jesus* in conversation. “I have decided,” said the one to the other, “to model my life after the life of Jesus.”

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official lived whose son was healed by Jesus (John 4:43–54). And there, key disciples were based as fishermen.

As Jesus took up the Baptist's call and "began to preach, 'Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near'" (Matt. 4:17), Jesus moved to draw His disciples closer: to join Him as apprentices in the school of disciple making, teach them the process, and share in the multiplication of His movement. His third invitation, *come fishing* (vv. 18–22), was a call to *participate* in fishing expeditions and on-the-job training.

systems (vv. 33–39) and people are treated as of more value than regulations (Luke 6:1–11).

For Jesus, making disciples was lifestyle based, sometimes disappointingly ordinary, and common sense: *come and see, follow Me, come fishing!* Engaged with everyday concerns, His growing circle of disciples needed repeated encouragement to *come fishing* with Him (Matt. 4:18–22; cf. Luke 5:1–11). Understanding them and the nature of the movement He was cultivating, Jesus followed a path that was experi-

understanding the sacrificial nature of God and His kingdom. He explained in the Sermon on the Mount: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27) or, as Matthew recorded, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:44, 45; emphasis added). In these words Jesus was inviting them to experience and reflect God's heart of *self-denial*.

While His fame was growing, Jesus' responses, ministry, and teachings were increasingly counterintuitive. He deliberately chose self-denial, status reversal, risk, and sacrifice—a road leading to crucifixion—inviting His disciples to travel with Him. They joined Him on His Galilean excursions into Gentile territories and later journeys through Judea and Perea. They listened to His kingdom parables, questioning religious systems while emphasizing organic processes (Matt. 13:1–52). Jews and Gentiles alike experienced His compassion for the sick and demon-possessed (Matt. 14:13–21; 15:21–39).

They traveled with Him into pagan regions—Phoenicia, the Decapolis, and Caesarea Philippi, where temples stood at the entrance to a grotto, the "gates of Hades." There Jesus used the word *ekklesia* (church or gathering) on the first of only two occasions recorded in the Gospels. There He asked His disciples, "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15, 16). Jesus responded by declaring that upon this truth He would build His "church"—or His gathering of disciples—to whom He would give "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (vv. 17–19).

Matthew, the only Gospel writer to record Jesus' use of the word *church* (or gathering), observes, "From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (v. 21).

Three times before He again spoke of His gathered disciples as *church* (in

Following in the footsteps of Jesus means choosing a path of sacrifice and self-denial.

These fishing trips began small but expanded in size and frequency until fishing for people became a lifestyle of reaching out and calling people. There were two phases: training to fish and equipping to multiply. The fishing took place in a synagogue (Luke 4:31–37), in a home (vv. 38–44), or at the seaside where Jesus repeated His invitation to participate (Luke 5:1–11). He gathered lepers, paralytics, tax collectors (vv. 12–32), and "large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan" (Matt. 4:25).

Multiplication took place when disciples made disciples, illustrated by Levi Matthew responding to the invite to *follow* by organizing a feast for Jesus at his home, and inviting "a large crowd of tax collectors" so that he could introduce them to Jesus (Luke 5:27–32). Multiplication happens when "new wine" is offered in "new wineskins"—when Jesus' relational kingdom is unimpeded by religious

essential, relational, and participatory, not simply the dissemination of information in workshops and study guides sometimes described as discipleship training today.

Deny self

The fourth invitation defines the radical upside-down nature of the movement Jesus was developing. This phase of ministry expansion and movement development began with Him choosing 12 from His now "large crowd" of disciples. These He called *apostles* (Luke 6:12–16). They were not a select, exclusive religious order or hierarchy; nor were they called to employed clergy ministry. Rather, they were the first of a multiplying movement of men and women gifted by the Spirit and sent "to prepare God's people for works of service" (Eph. 4:11, 12).

Through a deepening experience, relationship, and participation in His life, Jesus was drawing His disciples into

Matt. 18:15–20), Jesus drew attention to His coming crucifixion (Matt. 16:21; 17:9, 22, 23) and the life of sacrifice to which His disciples are called: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). He set the example of self-denial, serving as a slave in the upper room, making the ultimate sacrifice on Calvary’s cross.

This fourth invitation is radically countercultural in every culture. Following in the footsteps of Jesus means choosing a path of sacrifice and self-denial. For the apostle Paul, following Jesus meant opting for the rigors of tent making rather than sponsorship, the privation of *laos* (a people), *idiotēs* (unlearned person) rather than the political status and prestige of the *kleros* (inheritance), and suffering and imprisonment as a slave for Christ rather than personal comfort and popular acclaim. His life of sacrifice and self-denial reflected the life of Jesus. He could say, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1), and our “attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Both disciple makers and those they lead to discipleship walk the path of self-denial.


Receive the Spirit

Jesus’ fifth invitation, *receive the Spirit* (John 20:22), drew His disciples into replicating His mission. After washing His disciples’ feet, Jesus talked about betrayal, His impending death and departure, and their ministry. “I tell you the truth,” He said, “anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing” (John 14:12). He had been making disciples—inviting, modeling, equipping—since His anointing by the Spirit at His baptism. He now demonstrated surprising confidence in those disciples. Through the presence of the same Spirit, they were to multiply His work in a movement of disciple making.

On the Sunday evening of His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples to declare, “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). At the commencement of His ministry, Jesus was anointed to make disciples for the kingdom. Baptized by the Holy Spirit, we are to do the same. Doing “even greater things” for the greater number of those filled with the Spirit would multiply into a great movement (see John 14:12). Forty days later, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus declared,

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). On Pentecost, the Spirit came upon the waiting disciples as He had come upon Jesus at the Jordan three and a half years before, and the multiplication of disciple making for the kingdom of God had begun.

Conclusion: Our pattern

Jesus’ five invitations are entirely compatible with our ministry environments, including postmodern (see figure 1). (1) *Come and see* is an invitation to experience who Jesus is. (2) *Follow Me* invites us into a relationship with Him. (3) *Come fishing* draws us into participation. (4) *Deny self* challenges us to countercultural, sacrificial living. (5) *Receive the Spirit* is an invitation to receive empowerment for the authentic replication of His ministry. These invitations provide a frame for our tasks of *making disciples who multiply disciples* and of cultivating a movement! 

1 Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture passages are from the New International Version.

2 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), 131.

Figure 1: Jesus’ five invitations

1 SEE	2 FOLLOW	3 FISH	4 DENY SELF	5 RECEIVE the SPIRIT
(preparation) 30 years	(Judean ministry) 1 ½ years	(Galilean ministry)	Sermon on the Mount	John 20:21, 22 Acts 1:4–8
Experiential	Relational	Participatory	Sacrificial	Authentic presence

Make Disciples (Multiplication)
 Matt. 28:18–20

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