

MAKING DISCIPLES OR PLANTING CHURCHES

Jesus said: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** (Matt 28:19-20)

This is one of the most memorized passages in the entire Bible. When we stand before God in Judgement, however, it will not be sufficient to merely quote these words. If we choose not to obey, Jesus may very well ask: **“Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?”** What we “say” is not as important to God as what we “do”.

As we seek to understand this command let us consider that it is always wise to call Bible things by Bible names. Since words convey ideas, if we use words not found in the Bible there is a danger that we are using ideas not found in the Bible. As you probably already know, “making disciples” is in the Bible, and “planting churches” is not! Whether we understand everything about it or not, it seems obvious that “making disciples” is better than “planting churches”.

So let us dare to examine “church planting” in the light of Scripture. It seems that “church planting” has become a buzzword describing evangelism. Christian Colleges offer courses on “Church Planting”. Many denominations recruit workers to be “plant churches”. Dedicated missionaries deny themselves and at great personal sacrifice go all over the world to “plant churches”. May God bless everyone who labors for Christ in any way! May nothing in this brief article discourage anyone from the special ministry that God has given them. May all of us, however, be like Apollos and be open to learning the ways of the Lord in a more adequate way (Acts 18:26).

Considering this question about “planting churches” is not irrelevant, it is foundational.

- First, let us consider that your view of the church is very important.
- Catholics and Protestants are two major divisions in Christianity, and each has a different view of the church as it relates to the Bible and making disciples.
- Catholics generally believe that the church produced the Bible, and Protestants generally believe that the Bible produced the church. Which comes first is significant!
- Jesus taught His disciples to first “make disciples” and then baptize them. The Catholic church, however, regularly baptizes infants who are not disciples. Thus an infant who knows nothing about Christ, can be a member in good standing of the Catholic Church.
- Further, as most of you know, the Catholic church has a long history of forbidding common people from even reading the Bible.
- If you believe Jesus, however, you know that Bible study is not irrelevant. Jesus said that man does not live by bread alone, but by “every word” that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). Bible study is not irrelevant, it is essential!
- It should be obvious that the Word of God comes first, and then the church. From the beginning of the creation story God’s word always came first and then produced reality (See

Gen. 1).

- Jesus is the Word of God (Jn. 1:1). The church did not produce Jesus, Jesus produced the church (Matt. 16:18).
- When Jesus gave the “Great Commission” there was no church. Making disciples and preaching the Word brought the church into being, not the other way around.

Please do not consider this brief study to be an attack on the good and honest disciples of Christ who are “planting churches”. Their efforts have brought millions to Christ. Often the churches they establish are in areas where believers are being persecuted. These faithful brethren do not need to be criticized, they need to be prayed for and encouraged.

One distinguishing fact about Christ’s sheep, however, is that they recognize His voice and obey His commands (Jn. 10:1 - 5). If these thoughts about “making disciples” have come from Christ, they will be welcomed by His sheep. The difference, as you know, between building on sand, and building on a rock, involves obedience to Christ. With this in mind, let us consider again the famous words of Christ that are commonly called “The Great Commission”.

As we have already pointed out, Jesus commanded His disciples to “. . . **go and make disciples of all the nations . . .**” He gave this command on the basis that “**All authority in heaven and on earth**” had been given unto Him.

Also, as we have already pointed out, Jesus did not command anyone to “plant churches”. Planting churches is modern terminology not found in the Bible. It is fair to ask, therefore, “what difference does it make?”

This too is a foundational question. It may not make any difference to you, but it may make a difference to Christ. The Scriptures teach: “**If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God.**” (1 Peter 4:11). Obviously the best and safest course of action is to call Bible things by Bible names and not put words into the mouth of Jesus. Someone has quipped: “You can ‘plant churches’ without making disciples, but you cannot ‘make disciples’ without planting a church”

We repeat. This study is not intended to be confrontational. Some are already doing a good job of “making disciples” and “planting churches” is merely the terminology they use to describe what they are doing. Others, however, may not be doing a good job of “making disciples”. They may be putting the cart before the horse. They may be creating an organization of people who have no intentions of becoming disciples. For them, a change of priorities might be welcomed. Disciples, who know the Word, can be used by Christ make the church a reality. God’s fellow workers can build up one another in the holy faith (1 Cor. 3:9; Jude 20).

As we will later point out, Biblical illiteracy is a major problem in many churches. This is not a new problem. By the time some Hebrew converts should have been teaching others, for example, they still needed to be taught the elementary truths of God’s word “all over again” (Heb.

5:12). Obviously they had already been taught these “elementary truths” but did not learn them. One proof of their ignorance is that they were unable to teach others. Consequently, they had to go back to these foundational lessons “all over again”. Applying this principle to the modern church is one valid way of determining maturity. Can modern “church members” teach others, or after many years of teaching, do they still have to be taught “all over again”?

(Perhaps we should parenthetically consider at this time that the Scriptures never refer to “church members”, **“for we are all members of one body.” (Eph 4:25)** This subtle distinction is also significant. The church is not an “organization” but an “organism”. An “organization” is structured from without, an “organism” is structured from within. The church is a Body not a business.)

Regardless of what we “say” or “do”, however, it should always be done in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Col. 3:17).

Please consider the spontaneity, excitement, and success the apostles experienced as they went into all the world “making disciples”. Because they made disciples they were not working with dead and inert material, but with “living stones”. God promised to arranged these “living stones” into His own “spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5). When Jesus went to heaven He did not abandon his disciples like orphans. He promised to be with them until the end of the age. Nor does not flit in and out of our lives but will never leave us or forsake us (Heb. 13:5). Even more exciting, Jesus and the Father promise to make their “home” in our hearts (Jn. 14:23). As a point of interest the Greek word translated as “home” in this verse is “mone”. It is only used two times in the N. T. Scriptures, Jn. 14:23 and Jn. 14:2. In Jn. 14:2 it is translated as “mansions” in the KJV., and “rooms” in the NIV. How beautiful! Jesus has gone to prepare a special place for us (Jn. 14:2) and we are also to prepare a special place for Him (Jn. 14:23).

MAKING DISCIPLES

Now let us delve more deeply into the text.

- In the Great Commission of Matthew's Gospel there is only one imperative. It is to "make disciples." The Greek word is "mathateusate," which is the 2nd pers. pl. aor. 1, imper. act. of "matheuo." Going, baptizing, and teaching, may have the force of commands, but they are written as participles.
- The disciples were to teach their students to observe all of the things which Jesus commanded them. They were to replicate His life and follow His example. He promised to be with them in this endeavor until the end of the world. The things we have learned, we are to entrust to reliable men who are able to teach others (2 Tim. 2:2).
- The primary command of Jesus to His disciples was "Follow Me!" The verb "to follow" occurs approximately 80 times in the Gospels and almost exclusively describes the relationship between Jesus and His companions. W. E. Vine in his Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words states that this verb "is used 77 times in the Gospels, of following

Christ, and only once otherwise, Mk. 14:13."

- The Greek word for "disciple" is "mathetes". It comes from "manthano" which means "to learn", and is the basis of our English word "math". The Dict. of N.T. Theology states that the noun "mathetes" occurs 264 times in the N.T. (Exclusively in the Gospels and Acts)
- It is interesting that the disciples, who were commanded to "make disciples", never used the word "disciple" in their epistles. A similar word "manthano," which means "to learn" is found 25 times in the N.T. Scriptures (only six times in the Gospels, and once in Acts).
- The disciples of Jesus had been raised to observe rituals. With Jesus they maintained a relationship. Jesus seemed to avoid rituals. When He healed the blind, for example, He did it differently every time. Once He spat in the blind man's eyes, another time He spat on the ground, another time He did not spit at all.
- In the absence of rituals, the disciples learned spontaneity and trust. Upon one occasion Jesus sent them forth with no provisions. At another time He promised them that without human planning God would give them special words and wisdom. As they went to make disciples, they learned to trust and depend upon Jesus for guidance.
- Jesus led His disciples many places where they would never have gone without Him. He led them into Gentile territory, through Samaria, to Judea to raise Lazarus, and to Jerusalem where He was to suffer and die. Discipleship meant following Jesus regardless of the cost.
- In the upper room, Jesus shocked His disciples by announcing that now He was going where they could not follow. He promised, however, that He would not leave them as orphans (Jn. 14:18). He would return as the Holy Spirit and continue to guide them. In the flesh Jesus could only be one place at a time. As a Spirit He could be with all His disciples simultaneously.
- After His resurrection Jesus warned the disciples not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father. They were not to proceed on their own. They were basically to continue the same type of ministry which they had already been involved in for the past three years. Though He was ascending into heaven, they would not be abandoned. His Holy Spirit would come to provide them with guidance and power (Acts 1:4-8).

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

- The Gospels only tell what Jesus "began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1) The book of Acts records what Jesus continued "to do and teach" by means of His Holy Spirit. Guidance from heaven is evident in virtually every chapter. The disciples began "to follow" Jesus during His earthly ministry. Now they continued "to follow" the leading of His Spirit.
- Jesus called His disciples to be "fishers of men" after a miraculous catch of fish (Lk. 5:10). Against human strategy and wisdom, Jesus commanded them to launch out into the deep. His guidance enabled them to catch many fish. Their boats were filled to overflowing. The same type of supernatural guidance would also enable them to catch men.
- God is always reliable, but never predictable. The same Spirit that guided Paul to the big cities, guided Philip to leave a big city (see Acts 8:) The same Spirit that led Paul to teach three years in Ephesus, caught away Philip from the Ethiopian eunuch so that he could not teach him. The same Spirit that delivered Peter from prison allowed James to be beheaded

- in the same prison (Acts 12:). The Holy Spirit guided different men to do different things, at different times. We are always to follow His leading, even when we do not understand it.
- It was the Holy Spirit that separated Barnabas and Saul to their work (Acts 13:1 - 3). It was the Holy Spirit that pointed out Timothy to Paul (Acts 16:3; I Tim. 1:18). It was the Holy Spirit that prevented Paul from entering Asia and Bithynia (Acts 16:6, 7). It was the Holy Spirit that ultimately led him to Macedonia (Acts 16:8-10).
 - Guidance in the book of Acts came in a wide variety of ways. Sometimes it was from a passage of Scripture (Acts 4:25-26). Sometimes it was by common sense (Acts 6:2); by angels (Acts 8:26); by circumstances (Acts 9:23-26); by direct revelation or visions (Acts 10:10-16); or by the urging of friends (Acts 19:31). In each instance, however, it is safe to say that the Head of the Body was directing members of His Body.

CHRIST BUILDS HIS CHURCH WITH DISCIPLES

- As we have said, the church is a Body not a business. While we are “laborers together with God” it is still Christ Who is building His Church (Matt. 16:18). Consequently, the only way you can become a part of the Lord’s Body, or church, is when He adds you to it. So in Jerusalem we are told that the **“Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47)**
- As we have also already pointed out, a “body” is an “organism” and not an “organization”. Jesus is not the CEO of a business, He is the Head of His Body, which is the church (Col. 1:18).
- Jesus, of course, can guide and direct the members of His Body any way He wants to. In Jerusalem He chose to do so by means of His inspired apostles. So these early disciples devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers” (Acts 2:42).
- Note the priority of “doctrine” or “teaching”! Fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers are important, but not as important as teaching.
- Since God is not the Author of confusion, He later used gifted men like Titus to “straighten out” confusion in the church (Titus 1:5).
- Note again, however, that “making disciples” came first. God did not “plant His Church” and then try to make them disciples, He took disciples and formed them into His Church. When the church had problems, as churches invariably do, God used gifted men like Timothy, Titus, and others to “straighten out” those problems.
- One of those gifted positions was “administration” (1 Cor. 12:28). While this is an important gift, note that this gift is not the most important gift. Here is the list of God’s priorities: **“And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.” (1 Cor 12:28)**
- The greatest priority, of course, is love. The next chapter points this out in a beautiful and eloquent way!
- When the early church was scattered by persecution, they didn’t go out to plant churches,

they merely went everywhere preaching the Word. Soon, churches were everywhere!

IN THE EPISTLES

- The Apostles not only depended upon guidance from God, they taught their converts to do the same. Jesus taught them: **"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me"** (John 10:27.) At the same time He promised: **"A stranger they will not follow"** (vs. 5.) As Jesus commanded in the Gr. Commission, they continued to teach their disciples what He had taught them.
- Paul wrote to the Romans: **"For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God"** (Rom. 8:14.) This guidance was not just for the Apostles, but for all of God's children.
- To the Corinthians: **"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually judged"** (I Cor. 2:14.)
- To the Philippians: **"If in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you"** (Phi. 3:15.) Apparently, God would help the Philippians with some sort of special revelation and understanding.
- To the Colossians: **"And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts"** (Col. 3:15.) The word "rule" is "brabeuo" which means to act as an umpire. It seems that when a child of God is doing something God does not want them to do, God takes away their peace.
- To the Thessalonians: **"When ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of man, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh in you that believe"** (I Thess. 2:13.) Somehow, God's word somehow "works" in the believer.
- While the Holy Spirit has gifted some as teachers, God teaches some things to His children directly: **"But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another"** (I Thess. 4:9.)
- Guidance can come from the Scriptures when the word of God has "free course" in our lives: **"Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified, even as it is with you"** (II Thess. 3:1.)
- John wrote: **"But ye have an unction from the Holy one, and ye know all things"** (I John 2:20). **"But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things . . ."** (I John 2:27).

THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

- The Kingdom of God does not come with observation. It is within us (Lk. 17:20-21). You have to be "born again", however, in order to see it (John 3:3).
- The Greek noun "poema" (the basis of our English word "poem") occurs but two times in the Scriptures. It is used in Rom. 1:20 to refer to the physical universe which God created. It is used in Eph. 2:10 to refer to the spiritual universe which God created.

- God is not the Author of confusion, but of peace (I Cor. 14:33). The physical creation is a "universe" and not a "multiverse". Our physical universe reflects harmony and design. It is like a poem. The spiritual workmanship of God also reflects harmony and design. It is also like a poem.
- Unregenerate man is in rebellion against God. His **"heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9)**. His conduct is predictable. Moses observed that Israel rebelled during his life, and would be worse after his death (Deut. 31:27). He was right!
- Regenerate man is not rebellious. Ezekiel predicted: **"A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" (Ez. 36:26-27)**.
- Note that the letters to Christians are filled with optimism that: **"He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6)**. See also I Cor. 1:8; Col. 1:22; I Thess. 3:13; 5:9; 5:23-24; II Thess. 3:3-4; Gal 5:10; Phil. 3:3; etc.
- Even though regenerate man struggles with the remnant of his sinful nature (Rom. 7:) the outcome is predictable so that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). He that is within us is greater than he that is in the world.

LEARNING FROM THE BEASTS

- Job said: **"But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee" (Job 12:7)**. There are lessons which we can learn from the lower creatures, which can be extrapolated into the world of the Spirit.
- Salmon are spawned in fresh water, spend their lives in salt water. Somehow they are instinctively guided to the place of their birth where they lay their eggs and die. They overcome incredible obstacles, swim upstream and even jump waterfalls to fulfill their destiny. This guidance, of course, somehow comes from within.
- Scientists have experimented with many types of birds (such as the albatross and homing pigeons). They have deliberately tried to get them lost. Yet, somehow these creatures are guided over hundreds and even thousands of miles to the place where they began.
- Many creatures migrate on land, in the sea, and also in the heavens. The Arctic Tern, for example, travels from the Arctic, to Antarctica and back each year without getting lost (a distance of over 22,000 miles). If God can guide birds can He not also guide us?
- Ants are among the most numerous creatures on earth. There are 8,800 known species of ants and someone has estimated that they number ten million billion. This would far exceed the number of all mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians combined. Solomon said: **"Go to the ant thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest" (Prov. 6:6-8)**.
- The point is, it is not necessary to organize an ant hill. God has already taken care of that. This marvelous community of ants takes place without a "guide", an "overseer", or a "ruler". Is it possible that God is also guiding, and orchestrating, the members of His Body upon the earth?

- We are "new creations" in Christ Jesus. Old things are passed away, and all things are new. We have gone through a metamorphosis so that our "natural" desires have been replaced by the desires of His Spirit. The caterpillar crawls along munching leaves. The butterfly soars in the heavens and sips nectar. Christians have gone through a metamorphosis. We are new creations in Christ Jesus. We are no longer destructive creatures characterized by the works of the flesh. Our new life in Christ enables us to manifest the fruit of His Spirit (Gal. 5:19 - 25).

SOME OBVIOUS EXAMPLES

- Jesus is the Head of His Body the Church. By One Spirit we were all baptized into that One Body (I Cor.12:13). The various members of His Body are compared to a foot, hand, eye, or ear, etc. It is unthinkable that the Head of the Body would not have communication with, and control over, the members of His own Body. As members of His Body, we should take directions from the Head rather than merely imitate one another.
- Jesus is the Captain of our salvation. He has enrolled us as His soldiers. It is unthinkable that our Commander in Chief cannot contact and supply His troops. One reason the Gulf War of 1990 ended so quickly is that Sadaam Hussein lost the ability to communicate with and supply his troops. This will never happen to the Sovereign of the Universe!
- Jesus is the Good Shepherd. He knows His sheep by name. He calls them, and they know His voice. They somehow intuitively know not to follow strangers. It is unthinkable that the Good Shepherd cannot guide and direct His sheep (Jn. 10:1 - 18).
- God is the Father of His family. His children have received His "seed", and are destined to display His nature (1 Jn. 2:29 - 3:10). Jesus taught us to ask our Father for whatever we need, and promised that He would hear and respond. We know that the sons of God are led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14).
- There are many other similar examples in Scripture: husband - wife, King - subject, Master - slave, Vine - branches, etc. Each of these examples pre-supposes a relationship which is constant and vital. It is unthinkable that Jesus cannot communicate with, guide, and supply His people.
- In James 1:1 - 8, God has promised wisdom to those who ask for it in faith. The first requisite to receive this wisdom, however, is to lack it. We must bury our pride and come to Christ in utter humility. Then we must ask in faith, nothing doubting. Those who do this will receive the wisdom of God without being criticized. Those who doubt will not receive anything from the Lord.

THE NECESSITY OF DILIGENCE

- The Scriptures admonish us to walk "circumspectly". This literally means "like an acrobat". Lazy and slothful people are in danger of falling.
- Other Scriptural illustrations and analogies emphasize the need for diligence. For example: We are like athletes, soldiers, pilgrims, stewards, sheep in the midst of wolves, etc.
- We need to be diligent to test and confirm whatever guidance we receive for there are many

false prophets which have gone out into the world (1 Jn. 4:1). The devil is a deceiver who transforms himself into an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14).

- We must be careful to maintain a conscience which is sensitive to His leading. Anything which we cannot do with confidence, we cannot do, for: **"Whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23).**
- The use of our spiritual faculties or "senses," will help us develop the ability to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14.)
- We are not to be like the horse and the mule which have no understanding, but we are to be so sensitive to the leading of God that He can guide us with His eye (Ps. 32:8.)

WHAT THE FATHER IS DOING

- Jesus said: **"The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do; for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise" (John 5:19.)** Jesus did not have His own agenda, He came to do the will of God. His knowledge of what God was doing, enabled Him to participate in it. We also need to be aware of what the Father is doing?
- God is doing some great things today. We have witnessed the collapse of atheistic communism in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe.
- Not too long ago there were hardly any churches in Korea, now some of the biggest churches in the world are there.
- Revival has also broken out in China. Some estimate that believers in China may constitute the greatest number of Christian in any country on earth.
- God is also opening other great doors of evangelism and opportunity all over the world.
- This is not a time to establish our own program and agenda. It is a time to prayerfully seek guidance from God. The apostles toiled all night long and caught no fish. With His guidance they had great success.

WHAT ABOUT HIM?

- When Jesus told Peter how he was going to die, Peter beckoned to John and said: **"Lord, and what shall this man do?" (John 21:21)** Jesus told Peter that it was none of his business. Each of us is only responsible for following the leading of God in our own lives.
- Scripture warns us about measuring ourselves by ourselves, and comparing ourselves among ourselves (II Cor. 10:12.) What someone else does, or does not do, is not our primary concern. To their own master they will stand or fall. Our primary responsibility is to discover and follow the leading of God in our own lives.
- It is a common thing for Christians to imitate each other. This is especially true of young preachers emulating the lives of older preachers who are considered to be successful. While God "may" be leading in such an endeavor, it is important to remember that he may be a hand in the Body and you may be a foot. Regardless of what anyone else does, or does not do, we need to follow the leading of God in our own lives.
- It is altogether possible that God has sent us some gifted teacher, or "angel unaware" to

change the direction of our lives. When we do change, however, it is important that we do so to please God and not men. If we try to please men we cannot be servants of Christ (Gal. 1:10.)

- Jeremiah said: "**O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps**" (Jer. 10:23.) Solomon said: "**Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all of thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths**" (Prov. 3:5-6.)

The poet said:

He does not lead me year by year nor even day by day
but step by step my path unfolds, my Lord directs my way.
Tomorrow's plans I do not know, I only know this minute,
but He will say, "this is the way, By faith now walk ye in it."
And I am glad that it is so, today's enough to bear,
and when tomorrow comes. His grace is always there.
What need to worry then, or fret? The God who gave His Son,
holds all my moments in His hand, and gives them one by one.

(author unknown)

There are many "church planters" who will agree with everything in this article and still see no need to change their terminology. This, of course, is a matter between them and Christ. To their own Master they will stand or fall.

Regardless of your thoughts on terminology, however, it is a regrettable fact that many consider themselves to be in the "church" who have no intention of being a "disciple". If you doubt this is true, try passing out tests after the "sermon" next Sunday.

THEN AND NOW

While thousands were baptized into Christ on the first Pentecost after our Lord's resurrection, the word "church" is not mentioned in the book of Acts until chapter 5. There were, of course, 120 disciples in the upper room. 3,000 more were baptized into that "One Body" on Pentecost (Acts 2:41; 1 Cor. 12:13). Then God added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:47). At what point God considered them a church we do not know, but the word "church" is not used to describe them until after Ananias and Sapphira died. Then the Scriptures state: "**Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.**" (Acts 5:11) Obviously the "disciples" came first, and then the church.

We are told that these early disciples "**... devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.**" (Acts 2:42) Whatever training program they used it was so successful that when they "all" were scattered by persecution, these new

believers **“preached the word wherever they went” (Acts 8:3).**

As you know, if modern believers were scattered it would never occur to many of them to preach the word. Their entire experience in church is that of a spectator and listener. Someone else has always preached to them, and thus their training would lead them to seek for a place for this to continue. Consequently, the faithful ones would seek out a loyal church and keep listening. After years faithfully attending many are still so spiritually immature that they cannot feed themselves a single meal without profession help. Thus when the pastor cannot be present, they immediately summon help from someone else. Often interim pastors travel great distances to rescue the brethren who are “church members” in good standing but have never become “disciples”.

As we have already pointed out, this problem is nothing new. Please consider again these words of Scripture: **“We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.” (Heb 5:11-14)**

Alexander Campbell confronted this problem back in the 1800s. He vented his frustration by writing the following satire titled “This Everlasting Sermonizing”.

“This everlasting sermonizing! What good is in it? It resembles nothing that is rational in all the compass of thought. A. B. professes to teach arithmetic; he gets a class of forty boys from 12 to 15 years old, we shall say. He tells them to meet once a week and he will give them a lecture or a sermon on some important point in this useful science.

The first day he lectures on the cube root for an hour. They sit bookless and thoughtless, heedless, and perhaps often drowsy, while he harangues them. He blesses them and sends them home, to return a week hence. They meet. His text is arithmetical progression. He preaches an hour, dismisses as usual. The third day of the meeting up comes vulgar fractions: the fourth, rule of three; the fifth, addition; the sixth notation; the seventh, cube root again, etc.

Now in this way, I hesitate not to say, he might proceed seven years and not finish one accountant. Who ever thought that a science or an art could be taught in this way? And yet this is the only way, I may say, universally adopted of teaching the Christian religion. And so it is that many men have sat under the sound of the gospel (as they call it) for forty years that cannot expound one chapter in the whole New Testament. And yet these same Christians would think it just to prosecute by civil law that teacher who would keep their sons four or five years at English grammar or arithmetic, and receive their money, and yet not one of their sons able to expound one rule in syntax or arithmetic.

They pay the parson - they are of maturer minds than their children, and they have been longer under his tuition, and yet they will excuse both the parson and themselves for knowing just as little, if not less, of the New Testament, than their striplings know of grammar or arithmetic .

People can never be taught the Christian religion in the way of sermonizing. Public speeches may be very useful on many occasions; but to teach a church the doctrine of Christ, and to cause them to understand the Holy Scriptures, and to enjoy them, requires a course essentially different from either hearing sermons or learning the catechism”.. (Christian Baptist, p. 77)

While the preachers in Campbell’s day harangued them for an hour, less than 20 minutes is often deemed sufficient today.

As we have already pointed out, the disciples in Jerusalem were mature enough to preach to others in a very short time. This same maturity was also characteristic of the brethren in Rome. Paul was confident that they were **“complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another”**, (Rom 15:14). Whatever takes place in the assembly where you worship, it should equip the members of His Body so they can be “complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another”.

Building up the Body is not a top down procedure, but often involves horizontal relationships as the members of His Body build up one another in love (Eph. 4:15, 16). Please note that the expression “one another” is found many times in the Bible and is an integral part of New Testament teaching.

We are:

- Members one of another (Eph. 4:25).
- To love one another (Jn. 13:34, 35, 15:12; 17; Rom. 13:8; I Thess. 3:12; 4:19; etc).
- To be kindly affectioned one to another (Rom. 12:10).
- To prefer one another (Rom. 13:10)
- To edify one another (Rom. 13:10).
- To be like minded to one another (Rom. 15:5).
- To receive one another (Rom. 15:7).
- To admonish one another (Rom. 15:14).
- To salute one another (Rom. 16:16).
- To care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25).
- To greet one another (2 Cor. 13:12).
- To serve one another (Eph. 4:32).
- To forgive one another (Col. 3:13).
- To submit to one another (Eph. 5:21).
- To comfort one another (1 Thess. 4:18).
- To exhort one another (Heb. 3:13).
- To confess faults one to another (Ja. 5:16).
- To pray for one another (1 Pet. 3:8).
- To use hospitality one to another (1 Pet. 4:9).
- To minister to one another (1 Pet. 4:10).
- To be subject to one another (1 Pet. 5:5).

Someone said: “In the early church they all exerted an effort to exhort, while today everyone must be exhorted to exert an effort”.

Unfortunately, a Google search about “planting churches” does not reveal an emphasis on “making disciples”. Rather, there seems to be an emphasis on technique, structure and organization. For example, often “practical” steps are recommended like: surveying a new community, identifying needs, finding a place to meet, becoming incorporated, opening a bank account, writing by-laws, providing legal protection, instruction on ordinations, obtaining tax exemption status, receiving tithes and offerings, etc. While all of this information may be useful, it does seem to lack an emphasis on “making disciples”.

While every child of God is free to seek for guidance and obey the leading of His Spirit, “making disciples” was a top priority of Jesus and ought also to be to us.

Every though we are planting many churches, there is a growing awareness that many of these churches are facing a crisis in Biblical illiteracy. Some time ago, Kenneth Berding pointed out this problem in “Biola Magazine”. He quoted several authorities to make the point. Professor Timothy Larsen of Wheaton College, for example, notes that: “. . . biblical literacy has continued to decline. . .” Gallup polls have tracked this descent to a current ‘record low. Theologian Michael Vlach is quoted as believing that Biblical illiteracy in the church is one of the nine most important issues facing the Evangelical Church. George Barna concurs that “the Christian body in America is immersed in a crisis of biblical illiteracy.” New Testament scholar David Nienhuis addressed the same problem in an article titled “The Problem of Evangelical Biblical Illiteracy: A View from the Classroom”. Berding therefore concludes: *“For well over twenty years now, Christian leaders have been lamenting the loss of general biblical literacy in America. . . . Some among us may be tempted to seek odd solace in the recognition that our culture is increasingly post-Christian. . . . Much to our embarrassment, however, it has become increasingly clear that the situation is really no better among confessing Christians, even those who claim to hold the Bible in high regard.”*

DAWSON TROTMAN

Dawson Trotman, seemed to grasp what Christ was commanding. He founded the “Navigators” in 1934. In 1956 he died as he had lived, attempting to save others. Sadly, he drowned while attempting to rescue a swimmer in upstate New York. When Billy Graham preached his funeral he said “I think Dawson Trotman has personally touched more lives (for Christ) than anybody that I have ever known”.

Trotman had a passion for evangelizing men and women in the military. The traditional approach to winning lost souls involved inviting them to church so that a paid professional could tell them about Jesus. Trotman however, felt led of God to go where they were, and study the Bible with them personally. He placed a great emphasis on memorizing the Scriptures. While many congregations resulted from his efforts, his goal was to make disciples. He focused his efforts on

the disciplines of prayer, worship, and Bible study. Today the Navigators have 3,600 staff members, representing 60 nationalities working in 101 countries.

As we have said, memorization was a key component to his ministry. He not only memorized the Scriptures himself, but taught others to do so as well. The Word of God is the Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) and those who do not know the Bible are defenseless before the devil. Jesus quoted the Bible every time He was tempted, and we should be able to do the same. The psalmist "treasured" God's Word in his heart (Psalm 119:11) and meditated on the Scriptures "day and night." (Psalm 1:2). Disciples who hide the Word of God in their hearts reach for the Bible, not the telephone, when faced with an opportunity to witness

Graham summed up Trotman's life by saying: "Dawson loved the Word of God. I think more than anybody else he taught me to love it. He always carried his Bible around and always had it marked. The Word of God was sweetness to him."

In our generation we have seen the founding of literally hundreds of parachurch organizations. The reason for this unprecedented historical reality seems obvious. If the church was "making disciples" Dawson Trotman would have had no need to found the Navigators. If the church had been distributing Bibles there would have been no need for the Gideons. If the church had been feeding the hungry there would have been no need for the Salvation Army, etc. "Making disciples" should never be a vacuum in the midst of those who follow Christ.

As we have pointed out before, God is a God in infinite variety. Against all earthly wisdom God sent Paul, with all of his Jewish credentials, to the gentiles. Conversely, he sent Peter to the Jews. God did this in spite of the fact that the Jews considered Peter to be unlearned and ignorant. (Acts 4:13; Gal. 2:9). If the Head of the Body directs you to do something, you must obey even if you do not understand. When you obey Christ, the power behind you is always greater than the task before you. If you live your life trying to please men, however, you cannot be a servant of Christ (Gal. 1:10).

PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH

Early in 1948 God impressed upon Ed Stirm, a Christian businessman, the need for a biblical ministry in Palo Alto, California. This would not only benefit the people of the area, but especially the students at Stanford University.

Initially, the group was called the Peninsula Bible Fellowship. Within two years this Bible Fellowship had grown through effective teaching to the place where these disciples became a church and called Red Steadman to be their preacher. Elder Bob Smith said that through study and teaching of His Word, the Lord led them to some very basic principles of ministry. This involved the Headship and Lordship of Christ over His people, and the ministry of all God's people, not just pastors. I was privileged to visit that congregation in 1974 and was impressed by the fact that their "tract rack" was filled with verse by verse studies of the Scriptures.

Pastor Stedman had a desire to train others and established a program for interns to help them develop their own leadership skills. Chuck Swindoll and Luis Palau were interns there.

Among many other things, the Peninsula Bible Church became famous for “Body Life”. When I was there about 1,000 people showed up for a Sunday evening Bible Study. After an hour of teaching, a roving microphone was passed throughout the audience that the “Body of Christ” might be made aware of needs. After a half hour or so, those with needs were instructed to stay right where they were so that the Body might minister to them. I was particularly touched by the needs of a 15 year old girl whose mother was going through a divorce. The young girl said she needed a job, and her mother and two siblings had to move from their home and needed a place to live. At the appropriate time the whole congregation moved to someone who needed ministry. I went to this young girl and was pleased to see 6 or 8 others reach out to her with practical solutions. One man supervised apartments, another could use part time help in his business, etc.

The point is, the idea that every member of the Body is to minister is a Biblical concept. When some members of the Body do no ministry, the Body is handicapped. God gave spiritual leaders to equip the saints for the work of ministering. The goal of Christ is that the whole Body would be capable of building up itself in love. (Eph. 4:11-16)

THE IRON GRIP OF TRADITION

Many years ago a Baptist minister named Ralph Neighbour dared to dream of changing the traditions of his own denomination. Some of his struggles are recorded in his book “The Seven Last Words of the Church” (We Never Did It That Way Before). That book was published by Zondervan in 1973.

Ralph wrote to a friend at the Home Mission Board and reasoned about the need for things both new and old in the Kingdom. Just as General Electric and Westinghouse have a Research and Development staff, he felt that the church should also have pioneers willing to adapt and innovate. He never wanted to change the message of the Gospel, only tradition and methodology. He seriously considered “leaving the ministry” so he could work with twenty year old “pagans” and make disciples that were free from denominational traditions.

Fortunately, the Home Mission Board gave official recognition to his dream and also provided a limited endorsement for what he was doing. They even provided some money for expenses so Ralph could take a sabbatical and prepare to make his dream come true.

Thus, from it’s very beginning, the West Memorial Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, was determined to make disciples outside of established church traditions. There was no hidden agenda. Everything was open and above board. From the Home Mission Board to every visitor, everyone knew that this experimental congregation was going to be different.

Chapter 8 of the book is titled: “The Dark Night of the Soul”. Please prayerfully consider

Ralph's words about the difficulty he encountered in this experimental church:

“This chapter would be impossible for me to write were it not for my definite feeling from the Lord that other Christians may profit from understanding the depth of my discouragement and the power of God hand. How can I describe the agony of walking in the fields at a nearby ranch, begging God to let me die, or the times driving around in my car when only my deep love for my family kept me from driving into a concrete wall? It seemed as though all the preparations of my life had led to that moment when I would pastor our experimental church. Then it all came crashing in. There seemed to be no clear answer to my constant cry of ‘Why God, why?’” (p. 82)

Fifty years ago, the late W. Carl Ketcherside reflected on the ingrained traditions that have become an integral part of the “Western Church”. He mused that perhaps God might raise up a church in the East that would avoid many of our Western traditions. Perhaps he was right!

THE CHURCH IN CHINA

While China is officially an atheistic country, the underground church in China is growing at a phenomenal rate. If it is not already, it may soon be most Christian country on earth. The growth of the Chinese church has not resulted from conventional wisdom or marketing strategies. For example, many in the Western world connect church growth with a good location and high visibility. Just as a businessman does a traffic count and builds an attractive store in an ideal location, so churches are advised to think the same way.

In China, however, the church is not visible. Because of persecution it is forced to operate “underground”. Yet, while the church is on the decline in many parts of the Western world, the church in China is growing quite rapidly.

Alan Hirsch, on page 189 of his book *The Forgotten Ways*, tells of a meeting that took place in 2005 between leaders of the underground church in China and Christian leaders from the West. These persecuted believers in China asked for their western brothers to pray for 3 things.

- They wanted to have big churches. At that time they could only risk having 15 people gather in one assembly. Over 15 people meeting in one assembly would draw too much attention. Consequently, when they grew to over 15, they had to start a new group.
- In the second place they wanted to have church buildings. Church buildings were forbidden to them. Thus, they were forced to meet in private homes or other places. Would their western brothers pray that they could build church buildings?
- In the third place they were forbidden to have Bible Colleges, and thus were forced to train new leaders in their small house churches. Would their western brothers also pray about this?

Michael Frost, was there. At that time he was the vice president of a Christian seminary. In all good conscience, however, he simply could not pray for them in this way. He concluded that in many ways the Communist state was forcing the church in China to be true to itself.

Hirsch then quoted Philip Yancey who had a similar perspective. Yancey said: *“Before going to China I met with one of the missionaries who had been expelled in 1950. ‘We felt so sorry for the church we left behind,’ he said. ‘They had no one to teach them, no printing presses, no seminaries, no one to run their clinics and orphanages. No resources really, except the Holy Spirit.’”* Yancey wryly concluded: *“It appears the Holy Spirit is doing just fine”*.

While statistics are difficult to obtain, Prof Yang, a leading expert on religion in China, believes that the number of believers there will swell to around 160 million by 2025. Based on present growth, by 2030 that number could grow to 247 million.

Since the Chinese Government allows the Three Self Patriotic Movement to worship, some assume that there is religious freedom in China. The Voice of the Martyrs, and others, conclude that the official church is not the true church but reflects the Communist Party's attempt to use Christianity to further its goals.

THE WORLD BIBLE SCHOOL

When hearing the word “school” many automatically think of a building made with brick and mortar. The World Bible School, however, functions in a more efficient way. Since the 1950's, they have been sending Bible correspondence courses free, to students all over the world. They currently serve over 2 million students from 141 nations.

The courses were originally written for Christians who served in the armed forces overseas. These men and women, separated by war and distance from other believers, often had difficulty finding opportunities to gather for fellowship, Bible study, prayer and encouragement. To their delight, the Christian service men found their fellow soldiers had a great interest and hunger for learning from the Word of God and they began sharing the materials with thousands who were not Christians.

WBS continues to send Bible study correspondence courses to eager students through the postal mail, by email, and on the world wide web. Of course, they are all STILL free of charge. For further information visit the WBS web site and discover how disciples are being made and brought to maturity.

Since God is a God of infinite variety, there are, of course, many other examples of disciple making ministries in the world!

A LESSON FROM THE LOWLY MOSQUITO

3.2 k.m. off the West coast of Florida is an island called “Seahorse Key”. It is warm, heavily timbered, and swampy. It is a perfect place for mosquitos. Yet, scientists have virtually eliminated all the mosquitos on that island. The secret to their success was a sterile mosquito!

Every day these scientists released from 8,000 to 18,000 sterilized mosquitos on Seahorse Key. At the end of the experiment 96% of the mosquito population had been annihilated. Except for the influx of normal mosquitos migrating to the island,. the total population of mosquitos would have been completely destroyed.

One secret to the spectacular growth of the early church is that these early disciples were not sterile. They went about producing other disciples. While Paul was at Ephesus for two years all the Jews and Greeks in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:10). Paul could not possibly have done this by himself. Please consider Paul's inspired advice to Timothy: **“And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.” (2 Tim 2:2)**

Let us suppose, for example, that you are the only disciple of Christ on earth. Since you are not a profession evangelist, it takes you an entire year to make another disciple. World population grew by millions during that year, and after 12 long months your little church numbers only 2. If each disciple, however, has the same limited success that you did, here is what will happen.

Year 1 = 2. Year 2 = 4. Year 3 = 8. Year 4 = 16. Year 5 = 32. Year 6 = 64. Year 7 = 128. Year 8 = 256. Year 9 = 512. Year 10 = 1,024. For the sake of simplicity, let us round off this number to 1,000. While world population has increased by multiplied millions, your s small church still seems insignificant. If each disciple continues to make another disciple each year, consider what will happen in the next ten years.

Year 11 = 2,000. Year 12 = 4,000. Year 13 = 8,000. Year 14 = 16,000. Year 15 = 32,000. Year 16 = 64,000. Year 17 = 128,000. Year 18 = 256,000. Year 19 = 512,000. Year 20 = 1,024,000. Again, let us round this number of disciples to 1,000,000.

Using the same simple approach, let's project the growth of disciples based upon the simple approach of each disciple making another disciple every 12 months.

Year 21 = 2,000,000. Year 22 = 4,000,000. Year 23 = 8,000,000. Year 24 = 16,000,000. Year 25 = 32,000,000. Year 26 = 64,000,000. Year 27 = 128,000,000. Year 28 = 256,000,000. Year 29 = 512,000,000. Year 30 = 1,024,000,000. Again, let us round off this number to 1,000,000,000.

Year 31 = 2,000,000,000.

Year 32 = 4,000,000,000

Year 33 = 8,000,000,000

As you probably know, world population is less than 8,000,000,000

In this imaginary illustration, you would be world's greatest evangelist even though you had only made 33 disciples.

If each disciple made only one other disciple per year, the world could theoretically be evangelized in only 33 years.

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

Someone has quipped: "When all else fails, go by the instructions".

Here they are:

Jesus said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt 28:19-20)

"Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (John 13:17)