



Disciple-makers
The Keys to Growth

TRAINING MANUAL

The Great Commission

Then Jesus came to them and 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.” (Matthew 28:18-20)

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Session 2 - Healthy Disciples, Healthy Churches

The Great Commission

In our quest to grow disciples and churches in Wales, let's remind ourselves of the mission Jesus Christ entrusted to His Church. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus Christ, just prior to His ascension, entrusted His church with what became known as the *Great Commission*:

Then Jesus came to them and 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.'

Jesus Christ did not commission these followers to make converts to the Christian faith only, but to make disciples; to baptise and instruct new believers in the knowledge of and obedience to Christ's teachings.

But what exactly is a disciple? Is every person who walks through the doors of a twenty-first century church considered a disciple? When a person signs a decision card to become a Christian or who prays the 'salvation prayer', is he or she then a disciple? Here is a helpful definition of discipleship:

Definition of Discipleship

Discipling is an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ. This includes equipping the disciple to teach others as well.¹

A reading of New Testament Scriptures reveal how Jesus Christ and the Early Church placed a heavy emphasis on the importance of disciple formation and not merely converts to the Christian faith. Indeed, Jesus had some very high standards for those who truly desire to be His disciples:

1. Luke 14:26-27:

2. Luke 14:33

Evidently, Jesus placed stringent terms on anyone desiring to become His disciple, which included a reorienting of priorities and the need to make sacrifices if needed. Had He softened the conditions of discipleship, imaginably the crowds would have swept along behind him, but that was not His desire. He was looking for men and women of quality; mere quantity did not interest Him. In his message to the crowds concerning the conditions on which they could be his disciples, Jesus Christ employed two illustrations:

¹. Greg Ogden, *Discipleship Essentials: A Guide to Building Your Life in Christ* (Downers' Grove, IL, USA: IVP, 2007), 17.

Luke 14:28-33:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ... Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?

Jesus Christ employed these illustrations to demonstrate his disapproval of impulsive and ill-considered discipleship.

In this building and battling, Jesus Christ desired to have associated with Him disciples who are men and women of quality — those who will not turn back when the lighting grows fierce. The message Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship — not to faith alone but to faith and obedience. Jesus gave a solemn warning in Matthew 7:21:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord, ' will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Obedience is evidence of the reality of our repentance and faith. Our obedience does not achieve salvation, but it is evidence of it. However, present-day preaching finds little place for repentance, yet without repentance there can be no regeneration. Many have been encouraged to believe that because they came forward to an appeal or signed a decision card, or prayed to receive Christ, they are saved —whether or not there is any subsequent change in their lives.

We need to emphasise to those we are discipling that saving faith is more than just understanding the facts of the gospel. It is inseparable from repentance, submission, and a supernatural eagerness to obey.

The biblical concept of saving faith includes all those elements. It is sad but a true fact that whenever the way of the cross and its implications are not preached, superficial believers, whose conversion experiences have been shallow, fall away.ⁱ

Therefore, the mission that Christ has entrusted to His church is to make obedient disciples and not converts to the faith alone. He did not ask His followers to create buildings full of believers, but to focus on creating disciples full of God and His Kingdom mission.

How then does one make true disciples of Christ?

The Importance of Creating Quality Disciples

Unfortunately, throughout much of the twentieth century, this call to make disciples has largely been either misunderstood or neglected in Wales. With the Welsh Chapel model equating spiritual maturity with mere attendance, the Sunday preacher or the Sunday School teacher being the main and often, sole source of spiritual education and formation, it's not surprising how many churches in Wales have been in such spiritual decline. Wales is not alone.

In a document called, *The International Consultation on Discipleship*, the authors acknowledged how the worldwide church is “marked by a paradox of growth without depth” and many converts to Christianity throughout the world fall away from the faith.²

Contemporary evidence also shows that the beliefs and discipleship practices amongst Christians in the UK are not what they should be. In 2011, Richard Dawkins conducted a survey and found that:

- Only 32% of those who stated they were Christian in the census believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Only 35% could correctly answer the question, ‘What is the first book of the New Testament?’³

In an Evangelical Alliance, *Time for Discipleship?* Report, they found that:

- Less than one third of those Evangelical Christians surveyed said they set aside a substantial period of time for daily prayer
- Only 11% praying more than three hours per week.
- In addition, 50.5% of Christians said they engage with the Bible daily
- Only 40% agree that their church does very well in discipling new believers (a mere 8% in strong agreement).
- Furthermore, only 26% feel they have been well equipped to witness and share their faith
- Only 31% feel that that they had a good early experience in being taught good habits and disciplines for their prayer lives.⁴

Discipleship Deficit in the UK

At the 2014 Evangelical Alliance Conference, *21st Century Disciplemaking*, one of the attendees, Dr. Lucy Peppiatt, Dean of Studies at Westminster Theological Centre, UK, writes,

“There appears to be a corporate sense that the church has failed in some way in this area, and many are concerned that we recapture the truth that discipleship is at the heart of the gospel.”⁵

Alan Hirsch states it in bolder terms,

The Church in the West has largely forgotten the art of disciple-making... As a result, we have a rather anemic cultural Christianity highly susceptible to the lures of consumerism... In our desire to be seeker-friendly and attractional, we have largely abandoned the vigorous kind of discipleship that characterised early Christianity and every significant Jesus movement since.⁶

². International Consultation on Discipleship, *The Eastbourne Consultation Joint Statement on Discipleship* (Eastbourne, England, 24 September 1999).

³. Richard Dawkins: *Census shows that Christianity in Britain is ‘on the way out’* (The Telegraph, 11 December 2012, accessed 18 April 2014).

⁴. Evangelical Alliance. 2014. *Time for Discipleship? 21st Century Evangelicals: A Snapshot of the Beliefs and Habits of Evangelical Christians in the UK*.

⁵. Lucy Peppiatt: *The Disciple: On Becoming Truly Human* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), xiii.

⁶. Alan Hirsch, Darren Altclass: *The Forgotten Ways Handbook: A Practical Guide For Developing Missional Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009), 64.

This strong indictment cannot be ignored if churches in Wales are to grow out of their anemic state. This felt discipleship crisis calls for a re-examination of the processes and importance of discipleship if the Church is to prosper and see growth in the coming decades. Welsh churches can no longer afford to neglect the formation of quality disciples who are not only strong enough to resist the force of secularization, but who are also eager to share their faith.

Healthier Disciples, Healthier Churches

So far we've found that a discipleship deficit exists in the UK, including Wales, together with the importance of creating healthy disciples. This begs the question:

- Would reversing the lack of discipleship and investment in people's spiritual growth have the power to reverse declining Christianity and churches in Wales?

Prominent American pastor and theologian, Dallas Willard, seems to think so. For him, the crux of the matter lies at what is going on *inside* the Church, in the spiritual lives of its members. Although it appears on the surface that attracting numbers may be the issue that needs attention, the issue behind the decline is deficiency of spiritual maturity in the lives of professed Christians. He writes,

For at least several decades the churches of the Western world have not made discipleship a condition of being a Christian. One is not required to be, or to intend to be, a disciple in order to become a Christian, and one may remain a Christian without any signs of progress toward or in discipleship.⁷

He agrees that the all-important Biblical mandate to make disciples has been lost, and churches in the West are reaping the consequences. The growth of healthy churches cannot be separated from the growth of healthy disciples.

For Willard, this focus on the quality of life experienced by disciples of Jesus Christ is so important, because it is key to seeing churches prospering both spiritually *and* numerically:

Now, some might be shocked to hear that what the 'church' – the disciples gathered – really needs is not more people, more money, better buildings or programs, more education, or more prestige. Christ's gathered people, the church, has always been at its best when it had little or none of these. All it needs to fulfill Christ's purposes on earth is the quality of life he makes real in the life of his disciples...⁸

⁷. Willard, *ibid.*, 4.

⁸. Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (Oxford, UK: Monarch Books, 2006), xiv.

Accelerating Growth

If leaders are to grow churches in Wales, the focus then needs to be placed on growing the people within, on making obedient disciples of Jesus Christ, not just filling church pews. Towards this end, Jackson teaches there are three important areas of church growth:⁹

1. Numerical growth
2. Spiritual growth
3. Vitality growth (impact on community)

He states that if any church focuses on one area to the neglect of others, the result is an unhealthy, imbalanced church.¹⁰ Currently, the Church of England is experiencing numerical growth, with an extra 10% of people attending various Fresh Expressions of church within the denomination. In ten years time, Jackson expects that figure to rise to between 20 – 30%.¹¹ Good news perhaps? Yet Jackson also expects that these people will be less committed to church: “I can see the Church of England having more people but with lower average commitment.”¹²

Despite the fact that Fresh Expression Churches have seen important numerical growth, many leaders within this movement are also having difficulty in helping people to conversion and discipleship.¹³ The Fresh Expression movement seems to be successful in increasing numerical growth, but this is not automatically leading to the formation of disciples. Focusing on numerical growth alone does not achieve qualitative growth within a church – focus on all three aspects of growth is needed. Church of England and Methodist churches admit this is one of the biggest challenges they are faced with today. As Jackson explains,

“If you want your church to grow numerically, don’t focus on growing numerically. Focus on becoming better.”¹⁴

From Church planters and Church Consultants to Researchers and Pastors, this priority is a growing realisation, and not just within these denominations alone.

Church Growth Specialist, Robert Warren, author of *Developing Healthy Churches*,¹⁵ agrees that the primary issue in growing healthy churches in the UK is not about focusing on attracting greater numbers and new converts. For him, the key to growing churches lies with the need to grow people, the greatest asset in the life of the Church. It’s not a question of creating great programmes to attract new numbers of people, but rather a matter of “growing people into the fullness of their humanity.”¹⁶ This then needs to be at the heart of growing churches and disciples. He adds

Our calling is to nurture a loving relationship to God, to one another within the church and to the world around. It certainly calls for faith, sacrifice and ‘sheer dogged endurance’, yet it constitutes a clear and straightforward agenda for the

⁹. As explained by Rev. Bob Jackson at *Going for Growth Conference*, St. John’s College, Nottingham on 15th February 2015.

¹⁰. Jackson at *Going for Growth Conference*, 15th February 2015.

¹¹. In a personal email to me from Bob Jackson on 26th February 2015.

¹². Email from Bob Jackson, *ibid*.

¹³. Email from Bob Jackson, *ibid*.

¹⁴. Jackson at *Going for Growth Conference*, 15th February 2015.

¹⁵. Robert Warren, *Developing Healthy Churches: Returning To The Heart Of Mission and Ministry* (London, UK: Church House Publishing, 2012), 32.

¹⁶. Warren, *ibid.*, 32.

Church expressed in the three dimensions of 'Up' to God, 'In' to one another and 'Out' to the world."¹⁷

Building healthy churches in South Wales is not just a call to make converts to the Christian faith. It's not even just a call to make true disciples of Jesus Christ. It's a call to make disciples who live out God's mission 'out to the world.' In Ephesians 2:10 we read,

For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The way forward then is creating healthy disciples of Jesus Christ who live out God's purposes on earth. Encouraging growth that focuses on developing people into the fullness of their humanity, disciples transformed in heart and mind, who fulfil Christ's agenda in this world.

Discuss

1. Why is it important that we don't just make converts to the Christian faith alone?
2. What did you think about Jackson's three areas of church growth?

¹⁷. Warren, 11.

ⁱ Taken and adapted from J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Discipleship: Principles of Following Christ for Every Believer*, 21-22.