

(Practical Discipleship) 1. Disciples or Converts?

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the Great Commission as both evangelism and discipleship, and the need for believers to be gripped by the calling to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

Scripture: Matthew 4:6, Matthew 28:19, Mark 16:15, Luke 14:25, John 6:60, John 13:35, Acts 1:8, Ephesians 4:11

Topics: "Discipleship", "Evangelism"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of not focusing on just one Scripture but comparing and understanding different Scriptures on the same subject. He delves into the concept of the 'great commission', highlighting the need to both preach the gospel to all creation and make disciples of all nations to fulfill God's will completely. Poonen discusses the significance of evangelism, the role of evangelists in building up the body of Christ, and the common pitfalls in today's evangelism that focus more on saving souls than on discipleship and spiritual growth.

Transcript

It is a common mistake among believers to be taken up with one Scripture on a subject, to the exclusion of other Scriptures on the same subject.

Satan tempted our Lord with the words "It is written" (Matthew 4:6). But the Lord rejected the temptation by saying, "It is also written" (Matthew 4:7). The whole purpose of God, can be understood only when Scripture is compared with Scripture - when "It is written" is read along with "It is also written".

Consider the matter of "the great commission".

Jesus commanded His disciples saying, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mark 16:15). He also commanded them saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19 - NASB). These two commands are but two parts of ONE great commission. Only through a careful consideration of, and obedience to, both parts of this commission, can we find and fulfill the whole will of God.

Evangelism

The first step obviously is to go out and preach the gospel to everyone (Mark 16:15). This command is not addressed to the individual believer, but to the whole body of Christ. It is humanly impossible for any single individual or any local church by itself, to preach the gospel to every human being in the whole world. Each of us can, at best, have but a small part in this task.

But that part, however small it be, we must fulfil. Here is where Acts 1:8 comes into the picture. Each believer must have the Holy Spirit coming upon him and enduing him with power, if he is to be an effective witness for Christ. Note carefully, that all are not called to be evangelists (for Christ has given only some evangelists to His church - as Ephesians 4:11 makes clear), but all are called to be His witnesses.

An evangelist has a wider field of work than a witness. A witness has to proclaim Christ in the circle in which he moves and works - to relatives, neighbours, fellow workers in his office and to the others he comes across daily, to whom he may happen to be led to while travelling, etc. Here is where we can all be witnesses, whatever our earthly occupations may be.

But Christ has also given evangelists to the church who have a wider ministry of reaching the lost. However the evangelist's task is NOT merely that of 'winning souls' or 'bringing people to Christ' (as we commonly hear), but 'building up the body of Christ' (as Ephesians 4:11, 12 makes plain). Here is where the biggest failure of much of today's evangelism lies. Most of today's evangelism is related NOT to building up the body of Christ, but to saving individual souls. These souls are then usually sent back to their dead 'churches' where they soon get lost all over again, or at best, become lukewarm and fit for being spat out of the mouth of the Lord one day (Revelation 3:16).

Either way, they are not built into the body of Christ. Thus only Satan's purposes are accomplished - for the person has then become twofold a child of hell (Matthew 23:15) - first because he was lost to start with, and secondly because he has now been deluded by some evangelist into thinking that he is saved, when he is still lost!! The only thing that is built up through such evangelism is the evangelist's private empire. And the only reason for such evangelism is usually the evangelist's desire to make money or to get the honour of men, or both!!

Jesus called evangelists 'fishers of men'. But evangelism that is done in cooperation with unconverted "Christian" leaders and groups or with the sponsorship of vote-seeking political leaders is like fishing with a net full of holes. One cannot imagine Jesus inviting Annas, or Caiaphas, or Herod, or Pilate to sit with Him on the platform and inaugurate his evangelistic meetings! Yet many of today's evangelists not only do that, but also praise these unconverted leaders from their platforms.

Further, the fish that are caught in such "nets" are allowed to go back into the sea (dead "churches"), to be caught all over again at the next evangelistic meeting, only to be let back into the sea once more!! This process is repeated again and again by the many evangelists conducting interdenominational meetings these days, with each evangelist counting hands, decision cards, etc. Such evangelism brings joy, not to the angels of heaven but to the hosts of Satan! For, after all, how can angels rejoice over those who are made twofold the children of hell? Statistics in today's evangelistic meetings are totally deceptive.

Even if signs and wonders accompany the proclamation of the message that Jesus forgives sins and heals diseases, the question that still remains is how many have been made disciples and built into the body of Christ through such evangelism.

The apostles of our Lord never engaged in this type of evangelism. They placed their converts into local churches to be made into disciples and built up spiritually.

The five ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers) are listed in their order of priority in 1 Corinthians 12:28. There we are told, "God has appointed in the church: first, apostles, second, prophets, third, teachers, then gifts of healing (that refers to evangelists, since all evangelists in New Testament times had the gifts of healing), and then administrations (literally, 'those who steer the ships', referring to shepherds/pastors)."

This makes it clear that in God's eyes, the ministries of the apostle, prophet and teacher are more important to the building up of the body of Christ than that of the evangelist. The evangelist can find his proper place in his ministry only as he takes his appointed place in subjection to the ministries of the apostle, the prophet and the teacher. Only then can his ministry serve to the building up of the body of Christ. Here is where 20th-century evangelism has gone astray from the word of God.

Making Disciples

The purpose of evangelism can be understood fully only when seen in the light of the second part of the great commission - to make disciples in every nation of the world (Matthew 28:19). This is how the plan of God for the unconverted is fully fulfilled.

The convert must be made into a disciple.

Unfortunately, even the so-called convert today is often not a true convert, for in many cases he has not repented properly. In the evangelistic meeting he may have been told only to believe in Jesus, without any mention of repentance or making restitution. Such converts come to Jesus to be blessed and healed - and not to give up their sins. Most of today's converts are therefore like premature babies, pulled out by impatient midwives ('evangelists') in their lust for statistics - when the babies were not yet ready to be born! These premature babies usually die very soon, or live as problem cases for the rest of their lives - causing innumerable problems for their shepherds (pastors). Such people cannot be called "backsliders", because they never slid "forward" at any time, in the first place!! Jesus said that the angels in heaven rejoiced over sinners who repented, and not over sinners who merely believed, without repenting (Luke 15:7, 10).

Jesus said that salvation had come to Zaccheus's house, only when Zaccheus promised to make restitution for all the financial wrongs he had done in his past life - not before that (Luke 19:9). Unfortunately, today's evangelists proclaim that "salvation has come", even without any mention of restitution!

But even where there has been a thorough repentance, and a person has been truly converted, he must still be led on to discipleship, if he is to fulfil God's will for his life. Evangelism that does not lead on to discipleship is an incomplete job.

Often, it is the evangelist's desire to build his own kingdom that prevents him from working together with those who can make his 'converts' into disciples. We do not have to judge such evangelists, for we are told not to judge. But such evangelists will certainly have to answer to the Lord in the final day, for hindering their converts from becoming disciples.

The first step of leading people to repentance and faith must be followed by water baptism - as Jesus made plain in Mark 16:16, and as Peter preached on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). Matthew 28:19 also mentions the necessity of water baptism. So this is obviously the next step for all those who are born again.

Thereafter, he must follow Jesus in daily life as His disciple.

The Conditions of Discipleship

Luke 14: 25-35 reveals these conditions of discipleship very clearly.

There Jesus spoke about a man who had laid a foundation for a tower, but couldn't complete it, because he was unable to pay the cost of construction (verse 28-30). That proves that it does cost something to be a disciple. Jesus told us to sit down first and count that cost before even starting to build.

God doesn't want us to wait for many years after our sins are forgiven, before understanding what discipleship really costs. Jesus told people about the cost of discipleship as soon as they came to Him. He also said that a believer who was unwilling to be a disciple was as useless to God as salt that had lost its savour (Luke 14:35).

For a convert to become a disciple, he must first of all cut off any attachment to his relatives that hinders him from following the Lord (Luke 14:26). Secondly, he must be willing to deny himself and put his Self-life to death daily (Luke 14:27). Thirdly, he must give up his love for material possessions (Luke 14:33). These are the three minimum requirements for anyone wanting to be a disciple.

The first condition of discipleship is that we must cut off the natural, inordinate love that we have for our relatives.

Jesus said

If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Those are strong words. What does it mean to 'hate'? To hate is the same as to kill (1 John 3:15). What we are asked to put to death here is the natural affection that we have for our relatives.

Does that mean that we are not to love them? No. It certainly doesn't mean that. When we give up our human affection for them, God will replace it with Divine love. Our love for our relatives will then be pure - in the sense that God will always be first in our affections, and not our relatives.

Many don't obey God because they are afraid to offend their father, mother or wife etc. The Lord demands first place in our life. And if we don't give Him that place, we can't be His disciples. Jesus must be Lord of all in our lives, or He will not be Lord at all.

Look at Jesus' own example when He was on earth. Although He loved His widowed mother, yet He never allowed her to influence Him away from the perfect will of His Father, even in small matters. We see an example of this at the marriage at Cana where He refused to act on His mother's promptings (John 2:4).

Jesus also taught us how to 'hate' our brothers. When Peter tried to turn Him away from going to the cross, He turned around and rebuked him with the sharpest words that He ever uttered to any human

being. He said , "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to Me" (Matthew 16:23). Peter had made his suggestion with a lot of human love. But Jesus rebuked him, because what Peter had suggested was contrary to the Father's will.

The Father was always supreme in Jesus' affections. He expects us to have the same attitude towards Him too. After His resurrection, the Lord asked Peter whether he loved Him more than everything else on earth, before making him a shepherd in the church (John 21:15-17). Only those who love the Lord supremely are given responsibilities in His church.

The leader of the Ephesian church was in danger of being rejected because he had lost his initial devotion for the Lord (Revelation 2:1-5).

If we can say, like the psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven, Lord, but Thee? And besides Thee I desire nothing on earth," then we have truly fulfilled the first condition of discipleship (Psalm 73:25).

The love that Jesus demands from us is not the emotional, sentimental, human affection that expresses itself in singing stirring songs of devotion to Him. No. If we love Him, we will obey Him (John 14:21).

The second condition of discipleship is that we must hate our own self-life. Jesus said,

If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26).

He amplified that further by saying,

Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27).

This is one of the least understood of all of Jesus' teachings.

Jesus said that a disciple would have to "deny himself and take up his cross daily" (Luke 9:23). More important than reading our Bible daily, or praying daily, we have to deny ourselves daily and take up our cross daily. To deny our Self is the same as to hate our own life - the life that we have inherited from Adam. To take up the cross is to put that Self-life to death. We have to hate that life first, before we can slay it.

Our Self-life is the main enemy of the life of Christ. The Bible calls this 'the flesh'. The flesh is a store-house of evil lusts within us that tempts us to do our own will at all times - to seek our own gain, our own honour, our own pleasure, our own way etc.

If we are honest, we'll have to admit that even our best actions are corrupted by evil motives that arise from our corrupt lusts. Unless we hate this "flesh", we will never be able to follow the Lord.

This is why Jesus spoke so much about hating (or losing) our life. In fact, this phrase is repeated six times in the gospels (Matthew 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 14:26; John 12:25). This is the one saying of our Lord that is repeated most often in the gospels. Yet it is the least preached about and the least understood!

To hate our own life is to give up seeking our own rights and privileges, to stop seeking our own reputation, to forsake our own ambitions and interests, and to stop seeking our own way etc. We can be disciples of Jesus, only if we are willing to go this way.

The third condition of discipleship is that we must give up all our own possessions.

Jesus said,

No one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions" (Luke 14:33).

Our possessions are what we possess as our own. To give them all up means that we no longer consider anything as our own.

We see an illustration of this in the life of Abraham. Isaac was his own son - his possession. One day God asked him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. And Abraham laid Isaac on the altar and was ready to slay him. But God intervened and told him that the sacrifice was not necessary, because he had proved his willingness to obey (Genesis 22). After that, Abraham recognised that even though he had Isaac in his house, he no longer possessed him as his own. Isaac now belonged to God.

This is what it means to give up all our possessions. All that we have must be laid on the altar and given up to God.

God may allow us to use some of those things. But we cannot think of them as our own any more. Even if we are living in our own house, we must consider the house as God's; and that He has allowed us to stay in it rent-free! This is true discipleship.

Have we done that with all our possessions? Our possessions include our bank-account, property, job, qualifications, gifts and talents, wife, children and everything else that we value on this earth. We have to lay them all on the altar if we want to be true disciples.

Only then can we love God with all our heart. This is the 'pure heart' that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 5:8. It's not enough to have a clean conscience. A clean conscience only means that we have given up every known sin. A pure heart means that we have given up everything!

And so we see that true discipleship involves a radical change of attitude towards:

our relatives and loved ones;

our self-life; and

our possessions.

Unless we face these issues squarely and honestly, it will be impossible to fulfil the whole purpose of God for our lives.

Unless preachers proclaim this message of discipleship, without "watering it down", it will be impossible for them to build the Body of Christ.

The Pathway of Discipleship

Matthew 28:20 goes on to say that the disciples must be taught to obey and practise every single command given by our Lord. This is the pathway of discipleship. One has only to read Matthew chapters 5, 6 & 7 to see some of the commands that Jesus gave - that most believers do not even bother to obey.

A disciple is a learner and a follower.

The need in our land is for people who have been gripped by the calling to proclaim the whole counsel of God, who are themselves obedient themselves to all that Jesus commanded, and who eagerly desire to teach others too to obey all of Jesus' commands - and thus build the body of Christ.

Jesus said that all His disciples would be identified by one mark - their love for one another (John 13:35).

Mark that! The disciples of Jesus Christ are identified, not by the quality of their preaching or their music, nor by their "speaking in tongues" nor by their carrying Bibles to the meetings, nor by the amount of noise they make in their meetings!! They are identified by their fervent love for one another.

The evangelistic meeting that brings people to Christ must lead on to the establishment of a church in that locality, where the disciples love one another.

Yet the sad thing is that in many places where repeated evangelistic meetings are held year after year, it is difficult to find even one church about which it can be said that the members therein do not fight with one another or backbite against one another, etc., but love one another.

One can understand it, if new converts are unable to live such a victorious life immediately. But what shall we say if strife and immaturity characterise even the elders and Christian leaders in the churches of our land?

This is the clearest proof that the second and most important part of the great commission (mentioned in Matthew 28:19, 20) - discipleship and total obedience to the commandments of Jesus - has been totally ignored.

The first part of the great commission (Mark 16:15) alone is usually emphasised everywhere. There, the emphasis is on evangelism, the message being confirmed by signs and wonders done by the Lord.

In Matthew 28:19, 20, however, the emphasis is on discipleship - the disciple's life being manifested by total obedience to Jesus' commandments. Multitudes of Christians are taken up with the former, but very, very few with the latter. Yet the former without the latter is as incomplete and worthless as half a human body. But how many have seen this?

In Jesus' ministry, we read that great multitudes followed Him, because of His evangelistic, healing ministry. He always turned around and taught them about discipleship (See Luke 14:25, 26). Would that today's evangelists would do the same - either themselves, or in cooperation with apostles, prophets, teachers and shepherds who can complete the work that the evangelists have begun.

Why are preachers hesitant to proclaim the message of discipleship? Because it will reduce the numbers in their congregations. But what they don't realise is that the quality of their churches will become far better!!

When Jesus preached discipleship to the multitudes, it soon dwindled down to a handful of only eleven disciples (Compare John 6:2 with 6:70). The others found the message too hard, and left Him (See John 6:60, 66). But it was with those eleven disciples who stayed on with Him, that God accomplished His purposes in the world finally.

As Christ's Body on earth today, we are to carry on the same ministry that those eleven apostles commenced in the first century. After people are brought to Christ, they must be led to discipleship and

obedience. Thus alone will the body of Christ be built.

The way to life is narrow and few are those who find it.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

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