

In the closing words of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus leaves us with what has become known as "The Great Commission". In it, Jesus charges his disciples with a set of tasks until he returns. Here's what Jesus commands us to do:

- 1) Go out into the world and make disciples.
- 2) Baptize these disciples in the name of the Trinity.
- 3) Teach them to obey everything Jesus commanded us.

If we take a moment to evaluate how we, the Church, have done in accomplishing these tasks, I think we'll see where we've missed the mark, and hopefully where we need to get back on track.

First, we're called to go. It seems simple enough, but what frustrates me is how often I see us in the Church twisting this into a more comfortable format. For the most part, the organized Church has built a model of evangelism and discipleship that says, "Come to us". We build large buildings, we buy plasma television screens to announce our upcoming events, we host large-scale musicals and plays to dramatize the Gospel, and we instruct our members to invite their friends to Church so that the professional clergy can do the evangelizing.

I'm not trying to say that these methods are wrong or evil, but just that we've taken a very simple and clear command to "Go" and made it into a call for the lost to "Come to us". This isn't what Jesus commanded us to do. Jesus very easily could have commanded us to create inviting environments where the lost feel welcome. He could have commanded us to make space for unbelievers to show up and meet us on our terms, but he didn't. He commanded us that we should go out and, in the course of our everyday, regular life, communicate and live out the message of the Gospel among those we encounter everyday.

Secondly, Jesus commands us to make disciples. A disciple is someone who is daily, intentionally following Jesus with their whole life. A disciple is not a convert. If you take a look at how our local churches practice evangelism you'll probably see a lot emphasis placed on winning people to Christ, getting them to come forward in the meeting to make a public profession of faith, and not as much emphasis on taking them from this first step into all the other steps that follow.

As one example, I recently came across a very helpful tool called "The Engel's Scale" which charts the slow progression by degrees of those who are far from God and how they slowly come to faith in Christ over time and with the assistance of loving friends and the Holy Spirit.

What I found troubling about the scale was that it stopped at conversion. As if, after the conversion experience, we no longer had any need to chart their ongoing development and discipleship to Jesus.

Again, the entire emphasis was on conversion, not on discipleship.

I understand that there are exceptions to this in the Body of Christ, and for that I am very grateful. I'm simply pointing out that, at least as far as I have seen, most modern American Churches seem to focus entirely too much on conversion and not enough on discipleship, which is expressly what Jesus commanded us to focus on.

Thirdly, Jesus commands us in the Great Commission to "teach them to obey everything I have commanded". I find this part the most painful to explore. Simply put, I have never once encountered a church or a ministry where the main goal was to emphasize the commands of Jesus or to communicate a strong expectation of obedience for those who would call themselves disciples of Jesus.

If you want to know whether or not the Church has been obedient in the third section of The Great Commission, just ask yourself if you can name all of the commands of Jesus. If you don't know what all of these commands are, you not only cannot teach others to obey them, you yourself cannot obey them.

Jesus had an expectation that those who would follow him would...well...follow him. Obedience to Jesus was not an optional activity for disciples. Over and over again Jesus spoke about how those who love him obey his commands. His unwavering invitation was for disciples who would take his words seriously and put them into practice.

For the Gospel to become a living reality to those around us, it must become a living reality to those of us who have decided to make Jesus our Lord and Savior.

When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus responded by saying, "The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind...and the second

is like the first; you should love your neighbor as yourself". (Matt 22:37-39)

Without embracing the Great Commandment, we can never hope to accomplish the Great Commission. This is why Paul the Apostle tells us that, without love, all that we strive to do for the Kingdom is meaningless and empty. (1 Cor 13)

We have to love people because they are people that Jesus loves. We have to learn to love people unconditionally. To love others as He loved us. Until we get really, really good at this, all our efforts to evangelize and to make disciples will appear hollow and empty.

By Keith Giles

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