A Theological Vision for Discipleship: How Principles and Practices Work Together to Simplify Our Disciple-Making[1]

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Abstract

In this article, I employ doctrine to understand the concept of discipleship from a theological standpoint and the practical outworking of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. My work suggests that disciple-making begins with the triune God as the one who creates and matures his people in Christlikeness. When rightly understood, this serves to shape how we, God's people, partner with God in making disciples. Specifically, seeing that discipleship is ultimately God's design and work, it follows that God's people should make disciples in submission to and dependence on him. This sort of posture looks like allowing the principles by which God has ordered the disciple-making process to govern our disciple-making practices. In this article, I frame God's disciple-making principles in this way: God creates and matures his people (1) by his Spirit through his Word, (2) in relation to the local church, and (3) over a long period of time. In response to these principles, God's people should uphold the centrality of Word-based ministry, the importance of the local church, and the espousal of accurate expectations in their disciple-making practices. This ordering of principles and practices serves to simplify disciple-making for us by defining success, clarifying a biblical philosophy of ministry, and providing us with boundaries and freedom. Consequently, the theological vision for

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1   This article was written as part of the Zagreb Biblical Institute research project: "The Concept of Discipleship Among Evangelical Churches in Croatia."

discipleship I present in this article is something that Christians desperately need to comprehend and appropriate as we are constantly presented with an assortment of new methods and models for fulfilling the Great Commission.

Keywords: *discipleship, Great Commission, philosophy of ministry, Word ministry, local church, progressive sanctification*

Introduction

Most Christians want to faithfully fulfill the Great Commission and so make disciples to the honor and glory of God. Yet, what does faithful disciple-making look like? As someone who spent almost a decade in Croatia as a missionary, doing the hard work of language learning, church planting, pastoral ministry, evangelism, and discipleship, I had (and still have!) a strong desire to see the masses come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and follow him faithfully. I longed to see churches planted, pastors strengthened, and believers encouraged in the work of ministry. But where to begin?

To satisfy such yearnings, I embarked on a quest to understand how to make disciples. I turned to Scripture and mentors, as well as to the ever-growing market of disciple-making programs and materials. At first, the availability of such resources was encouraging; many faithful Christians have given much thought to the topic. Nevertheless, the sheer number of resources and differing opinions I encountered made me confused and disoriented. I imagine I am not alone in my experience. The number of voices that speak authoritatively from different perspectives pulls us in different directions, creating ministerial anxiety.

For example, some have examined the earthly ministry of Jesus and the early church as a model for making disciples, with the most famous of these being the work of Dr. Robert E. Coleman. In his books *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (2010) and *The Master Plan of Discipleship* (2020), Dr. Coleman looks at both the Gospel accounts and the book of Acts in order to deduce principles to inform our disciple-making practices. The result is beneficial reflections on how to faithfully make disciples, which have helped millions. And yet, because his work is confined to the exegesis of selected portions of Scripture, he typically does not explicitly connect his deductions with the rest of the Bible and systematic theology.[2] Given this, readers are left wondering how the whole of Scripture speaks to the topics of discipleship and disciple-making.

There is also the popular work of David L. Watson and Paul D. Watson, who seek to streamline the disciple-making process through the use of small group

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2 Though I admit, Dr. Coleman does this occasionally, especially in *The Master Plan of Discipleship*.

Bible studies. Specifically, they want to catalyze what they call "Disciple Making Movements" (Watson and Watson 2014, 5) through the use of their "Discovery Bible Study" (DBS) model (2014, 141-156).[3] This method heavily encourages attendees of a DBS to answer questions and so discover the meaning of the Bible for themselves. Whereas most Bible study groups have a leader who teaches and conveys information, DBS groups function differently. The Watsons believe that if a group leader engages in any sort of teaching ministry, it will truncate the attendees' spiritual growth by drawing them away from reliance on Scripture and the Holy Spirit.[4] Thus, the Watsons state that DBS group leaders should be called "facilitators." Their role is not to teach or correct attendees' interpretations of the Bible, but simply to ask questions to lead attendees in a journey of discovery (2014, 150-151). And, from what they claim, their method works! They recount how in just nine years they witnessed the establishment of 26,911 churches and baptized 933,717 people (2014, xiii-xiv). Nevertheless, we must ask, does this end justify the means? Are these means founded in Scripture? While I commend the Watsons' desire to see disciples multiply and agree with their prioritization of Scripture in disciple-making, their demeaning of teaching ministry as vital to disciple-making is out of line with Scripture's vision of the life of the church, the function of preaching, and the place of pastoral ministry (Roberts 2015). Despite their good intentions and the apparent effectiveness of their methods, this is just one of the practices from their methodology, which is haphazard and theologically dangerous.[5]

A final example of the wide range of voices and perspectives on disciple-making is the multifaceted ministry of churches like Bethel in Redding, California. Bethel Music, the music label and publishing group attached to Bethel church, has a multitude of songs that are sung by churches around the world. The songs are produced with musical finesse, making their style captivating and emotionally moving. And yet, despite the popularity of Bethel music, many of these songs flow from a church and leadership which champions extra-biblical prophecy (Vallotton 2024), heretical views on healing, alleged grave soaking, worship-service glory clouds (Carter 2018) and the use of *The Passion Translation*, a linguistically and textually questionable Bible translation (Carter 2018; Shead 2018). For someone looking in from the outside, though, and regardless of the theological concerns, it may be tempting to think that Bethel has unlocked the secret to affecting millions for Christ through their catchy music. Maybe, instead of upholding traditional

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3   For more on this topic, see Debeljuh 2024.

4   "...if we want to disciple people who look to Scripture and the Holy Spirit for answers to their questions, we can't be the answer people… If groups do not learn to go to Scripture and rely on the Holy Spirit… they will not grow as they should and will not replicate much, if at all" (Watson and Watson 2014, 150).

5   For an informative debate on this and similar topics see Buser 2018.

theology in our disciple-making, we should instead appeal to sound frequencies that pull the heartstrings of men and women to win them to Christ.

How do we gain our bearings amid all the opinions and approaches to disciple-making? My claim in this article is that the bewilderment caused by an excess of opinions is dissipated as we allow God's doctrinal principles of disciple-making found in Scripture to govern our disciple-making practices. To state it positively, when we respect this ordering of principles and practices, it serves to simplify disciple-making for us amidst the vast number of discipleship resources available.[6]

To argue this, I will begin by presenting my conviction that the use of doctrine helps us understand the theological nature and practical outworking of discipleship and the Great Commission. This will explain the methodology and hermeneutical framework of my study. With this groundwork laid, I will then introduce disciple-making as God's work. This is essential to understand to rightly approach our role in disciple-making, which is the second topic I will discuss. I will then evaluate three doctrinal principles by which God has ordered the discipleship process. I focus on these three principles not because they represent all that could be said about disciple-making but because, in my experience and research, these particular principles are either underemphasized and not prioritized or they are emphasized but wrongly applied. To state them here, I believe that God creates and matures his people (1) "by his Spirit through his Word,"[7] (2) in relation to the local church, and (3) over a long period of time. As I examine these principles, I will also discuss how they should shape our disciple-making practices. Finally, I will conclude with some brief thoughts on how this all serves to simplify our disciple-making efforts by defining success, clarifying a biblical philosophy of ministry, and providing us with boundaries and freedom.

1. Doctrine and Discipleship

A hermeneutical assumption of mine is that doctrine is our friend, a helpful guide, as we seek to understand the topics of discipleship and disciple-making. Based on the work of John Webster, scholars R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman speak about the relationship between exegesis and doctrine, or, we might say, biblical studies and systematic theology.[8] In the modern theological landscape, these two modes of reasoning are often pitted against one another. At best, their relationship is thought of as moving in one direction: exegesis leads to the production of doc-

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6   Though this certainly does not mean that making disciples is an easy and effortless task! As I state in the article, by simplicity I am thinking of clarity.

7   The phrase "by his Spirit through his Word" comes from J. I. Packer 2008, 110; Lawrence 2023.

8   In this paragraph I am drawing from Jamieson and Wittman 2022, xvii-xx, and the more accessible interview with these authors conducted by Thacker 2022.

trine, but doctrine cannot assist exegesis. The logic is that doctrine exists outside of the biblical text and, once formed, acts to impose on the text that which is not there. While agreeing with the fact that exegesis produces doctrine, and while the biblical text is our sole source of authority, Jamieson and Wittman rightly argue that exegesis and doctrine are nevertheless mutually informative. Both exegesis and doctrine work in tandem, advising one another, and so accomplishing the same goal: "understanding and representing the apostles' and prophets' witness to the reality of God and the relation of all things to God." The authors explain, "theology… is not a movement away from Scripture toward some distant logical synthesis," rather, "Dogmatic judgements and concepts that are properly derived from exegesis can enrich and direct exegesis." In this way, Jamieson and Wittman show that doctrine is not a "superstructure" imposed upon Scripture. Instead, doctrine reveals Scripture's "substructure" or, what they call, the "grammar of Scripture." They elaborate, "dogmatic reasoning discerns what must be the case if everything Scripture says is true." It follows that doctrine can be used as a lens through which we can better understand and exegete Scripture. To put it simply, the more one reads and interprets the Bible (exegesis), the more he or she begins to think biblically (doctrine) and so is better able to read and interpret Scripture (exegesis), linking the parts to the whole. It is my conviction that doctrine can and should be employed to help us better understand the concept of discipleship from a theological standpoint as well as the practical outworking of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. This will, in turn, assist us in knowing how to rightly order our disciple-making practices to fulfill the Great Commission.

The concept of discipleship, following Jesus as master and teacher, was foundational to the life and ministry of Jesus. Throughout the gospel accounts, Jesus called individuals to follow him in radical allegiance (Mk 8:34) and taught his followers in word and deed (Mt 5:1-7:25; Mk 4:35-41). Jesus also walked with his disciples (Mk 6:31), ate with them (Jn 21:9-14), modeled godliness to them (Mk 10:35-45), exercised patience with their folly (Mk 8:31-33), and involved them in his ministry (Mt 10:1-15; Lk 9:1-2). Following his death and resurrection, he commissioned them to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:18-20). Any reader of the gospels can hardly make it through the accounts without noting the importance of discipleship to Jesus.

Yet, though we may be tempted to confine a discussion on discipleship to the earthly ministry of Jesus, this temptation overlooks how the historical and cultural concept of discipleship fits theologically into the Bible's presentation of the triune God's work in creating and maturing his people.[9] Just as Yahweh called the descendants of Abraham to himself and established them as his people in the Old Testament (Ex 19:4-6), so this same triune God continued to work both during

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9 This is what I believe differentiates a theological understanding of discipleship from a merely Jewish and cultural one.

and following the earthly ministry of Jesus to save sinners and establish them as his people (1 Pet 2:9-10). To claim that something else was in view in Jesus' earthly ministry and the Great Commission would be far-fetched and strange. It is not as though we can divorce Jesus' discipleship agenda as the second person of the Trinity from what the triune God accomplished in the Old Testament and continues to do in our day and age; these realities must be connected. Certainly, if the concept of discipleship was so vital to Jesus' earthly ministry, and then his continued ministry by his Spirit through his disciples (as seen in the Great Commission and the book of Acts), and if there is unity within God and consistency in his persons and works (Heb 13:8; Ps 102:27; Jas 1:17) (Lawrence 2023), then it is reasonable view discipleship as flowing from the plan of the triune God in the salvation and restoration of his people.[10]

This is equally true for the Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18-20. Here, Jesus describes how he intends for his command, "make disciples" (μαθητεύσατε), to be carried out through the use of the verbal participles "go" (πορευθέντες), "baptizing" (βαπτίζοντες), and "teaching" (διδάσκοντες).[11] Surely, Jesus' command and the means he provides to fulfill it are not random or novel, disconnected from God's eternally established salvific agenda. Rather, as others have observed, the Great Commission fits within the larger vision of how God has ordered the process of creating and maturing his people.[12]

That said, and at risk of prematurely jumping ahead, the three doctrinal principles I list in this article represent the theological ecosystem in which the Great Commission lives. As such, they serve to explain why Jesus' words are not arbitrary and serve to elucidate their practical expression (i.e., why does "teaching" in particular make disciples, and what does teaching look like in real life?). The first principle, "God creates and matures his people by his Spirit through his Word," is assumed in the concepts of "go" and "teaching." We know this because, as I

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10 This connection is also demonstrated, however subtly, through the various titles which the NT authors ascribe to God's people. Titles such as "disciples" (Mt 28:18-20), "brothers" (Phil 4:21), "saints" (1 Cor 1:2), or "fellow citizens… members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19), make a theological claim: these people are God's people (Tarrants 2014). In fact, many texts use different titles for God's people interchangeably. For example, in Acts 11:26, we read that "the disciples" were called "Christians." Likewise, in Colossians 1:2, Paul addresses the Christians in Colossae as "saints and faithful brothers." This use of different titles that refer to the same object reveals a "substructure," a theological interconnectedness between them. Consequently, even through something as seemingly minor as titles, we learn that discipleship is intimately connected with membership among God's people.

11 Throughout this article, I use the English Standard Version when quoting Scripture.

12 "The focus of Matthew 28:16-20 is ecclesiology; it's about the Church's inauguration, identity and union with Christ in order to be an extension of his own life in the world. Ecclesiology is the fountainhead of missiology. Like Jesus, we are commissioned to 'do' who we 'are' and that's what makes it GREAT" (Castleman 2007, 70). See also Leeman 2016, 49-53; 105-108.

discuss below, the book of Acts portrays how the apostles began to carry out the Great Commission through going to the nations, and going specifically to preach the gospel and teach believers God's truth. The second principle, "in relation to the local church," is assumed in the concept of "baptizing," which has literary and thematic connections in Matthew's gospel to Jesus' discussion on the church/ἐκκλησία (Mt 18:15-20; cf. 16:18-20) and is the means of public identification with Jesus and his people (e.g. Acts 2:41) (Leeman 2016, 97-108; Jamieson 2014, 35-53). Finally, the third principle, "over a long period of time," is not assumed in any of the verbal participles in the Great Commission but rather in Jesus' statement, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). While this is a statement intended primarily to comfort the disciples, this also means that the work of disciple-making will be ongoing until Christ's return. As we should expect, there is unity in Scripture and the mind of the triune God and how he works to accomplish his will.

For these reasons, I hold that the doctrinal principles I elaborate on in this article are intimately related to the topic of discipleship and disciple-making and should not be detached from them. Indeed, these principles help us understand discipleship and how we can fulfill the Great Commission. Therefore, throughout this work, when I use terms such as "discipleship," "discipleship process," and "God's discipleship economy," I am not referring to Jesus' earthly ministry in particular but rather the plan of the triune God for the salvation and maturation of his people.[13] Additionally, for the sake of brevity, when I use the word "God" throughout this article, I am referring to the Christian, triune God, while also understanding that each person of the Trinity has their specific roles in creating and maturing God's people.[14]

With this groundwork laid, we can now turn to the body of this article, which begins with God and his role as the one who creates and matures his people. This

13 For the sake of space, I have not reviewed the outworking of these principles in the earthly disciple-making ministry of Jesus, though I do believe that they are present. For an overview of the role of the Spirit in the Word-based ministry of Jesus see Ash 2011, 7-32. Regarding the importance of the church, I believe this is seen in seed form in Jesus' calling of the disciples as a unit, a community (Coleman 2010, 45). Additionally, the church was the result of Jesus' earthly ministry. Not only does Jesus look forward to its formation in Matthew 16:13-20; 18:15-20, but then the beginning fulfillments of the Great Commission in Acts has the church (and particularly local churches) in view. For more on this, see Dever 2016. Finally, the concept that discipleship as a long process is obvious to Jesus' earthly ministry with his disciples. He knew what kind of men with their multifaceted flaws he called to follow him. He bore with their folly and did not expect change overnight. In this sense, the first disciples' sanctification was progressive in nature.

14 To elaborate on Trinitarian doctrine proper would require extensive space which I do not have. For a fuller discussion on the distinct roles of Father, Son, and Spirit in the life of God's people see Reeves 2012; Jamieson and Wittman 2022.

will eventually lead to an understanding of how God's ordering of the discipleship process affects how we work to make disciples.

2. God's Work in Disciple-Making

God alone creates his people, giving "*spiritual* life to the *spiritually* dead."[15] Humankind did not present God with a roadmap for redemption or conjure up the idea of worshiping him. In fact, it's the opposite. Throughout Scripture, humans are presented as dead in sin and rejectors of God and his goodness; we do not naturally fear God (Eph 2:1-3). David bemoans this reality when he says, "They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one" (Ps 14:3; cf. 53:1-3; Rom 3:10-11). Despite what we deserve, God, in his mercy, seeks us out to save us and create redeemed people for his glory. As the apostle John claims, God is the initiator of salvation: "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." (1 Jn 4:10). On a similar note, Paul writes that it is God who blesses us, elects us, adopts us, redeems us, and forgives us, by his grace and for his glory (Eph 1:3-10). Paul also makes clear that we are passive in God's work of justification; it is a work done to us, not by us (Rom 5:1). God's unilateral work of creation in salvation is vital to discipleship, and yet His role in believers' lives does not end there.

God also works in those he saves to bring them to spiritual maturity. In Romans 8:1-4, we learn that through the Spirit, believers are enabled to fulfill the requirements of the law and walk in a manner worthy of God's righteous standards. Paul elaborates on this work of transformation similarly in 1 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." God is invested in those he saves to change how they think, act, speak, and live. He not only gives them a new name but, over time, works in them a new, Christlike character.

Given this, it is reasonable to conclude that discipleship exists first and foremost because of God and his creating and maturing work. No one becomes a disciple of Jesus apart from God's saving work in their life. Moreover, no one can hope to grow in Christian maturity without God's assistance. Disciples of Jesus owe the reality of their discipleship first and foremost to God and his sovereign grace. This is vital to a discussion on disciple-making because it is only as we understand God's role that we can rightly comprehend ours.

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15   A phrase borrowed from Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert 2012, 27.

3. Our Work in Disciple-Making

While disciple-making ultimately depends on God, he uses human servants to help bring this process to fruition. To be clear, while humans cannot save, the Great Commission assumes that Jesus' disciples can make disciples. To make sense of this relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, I want to examine 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 and Matthew 28:18-20. Both of these texts showcase the interplay between God and his human servants in the discipleship process. In turn, they teach us that because discipleship is ultimately God's design and work, God's servants should make disciples in submission to and dependence on him.

The Corinthian church was divided, with believers splitting into factions centered around their favorite preachers, which led to "quarreling" (1 Cor 1:11). Paul explains the essence of their factionalism in this way: "Each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ'" (1:12). How did Paul address this problem?

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:5 to combat this party spirit, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each." Allow me to make some observations. First, Paul's words, "through whom you believed," remind his readers that men like Paul and Apollos were instrumental in their conversion; through them, the Corinthians believed the word of the gospel (3:5; cf. 2:1). Second, with the phrase, "servants," Paul makes sure the church understands how unimpressive and insignificant preachers like himself and Apollos are and therefore, how absurd it is to boast in them. Third, Paul's correction continues as he points believers to the true source of their conversion and reason for boasting: "I planted, Apollos watered, but *God* gave the growth" (3:6; *emphasis mine*). While human preachers are instrumental in the conversion process, God is indispensable. Finally, Paul concludes by teaching the Corinthians that they should conceptualize servants like himself and Apollos as "God's fellow workers" (3:9). In just a few words, Paul effectively demonstrates how irrational the believer's divisions are, redirects their focus to God, and provides them with a category for how to think about preachers like Paul and Apollos.

For our purposes, this text shines a light on God's use of human servants in disciple-making. First, this passage reveals that God partners with humans to make disciples; both God and humans were involved in the Corinthians' conversion story. Second, this passage shows the roles of each party in this partnership. Even though Paul and Apollos were influential in the Corinthians' conversion, God alone granted growth (3:6), which means that the parties in this partnership are not equally responsible. No matter how well Paul and Apollos presented the

gospel (2:1-4), human efforts would have been in vain without God's work in the Corinthians. This implies that humans depend on God in their disciple-making efforts. Additionally, even though the term "fellow workers" (partners) is honorific, Paul does not view himself too highly, for he simultaneously sees himself and Apollos as God's servants (3:5). From this, we learn that the disciple-making partnership that God has established with humans contains an ordering of relationships. Paul and Apollos, and for that matter, all of God's partners, are God's inferiors. This implies ideas of subordination and submission; God is the master, the commander, and the superior, as his partners endeavor to make disciples.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20 provides similar conclusions. Having risen from the dead, Jesus announces, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28:18). With these words, Jesus claims that he is king over all (Jamieson 2020, 13-15). According to Jesus, the implication of his universal kingship is that his disciples are to make more disciples ("therefore… make disciples," 28:19) by going, baptizing, and teaching (28:19-20) (Morris 1992, 746; France 1985, 419). Jesus' rank as king and his disciples' status as his subjects are implicit here. The king gives a decree and specific directions for how to carry it out while his subjects listen and submit. As they go about this work, the king expects them to do so within the bounds which he has set. After all, the subjects' work proceeds from the king's decree and design, not theirs. Intrinsic to the disciple-making partnership between God and his people is a relational hierarchy in which God is king, and his people are his servants. Consequently, both 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 and Matthew 28:18-20 clarify the nature of the Christian's role in disciple-making.

Our role in disciple-making is to execute our King's command to make disciples, but we must do so with an attitude of submission and dependence on our King. As the initiator and designer of disciple-making, God is the one who sets the agenda of what the discipleship process looks like and how it happens. God is not looking for our creative input as if he is bumbling around, clueless about accomplishing his will. Instead, as those whom God has enlisted into his service, we heed his commands and follow his lead. Moreover, since disciple-making ultimately hinges on God, we must depend on God in all our efforts. In this sense, dependence does not mean laziness, for as we have seen, God has given us work to do. Instead, dependence means trusting God to do what cannot be done apart from him (create and mature his people) and looking to him for guidance in the work he has given us to participate in. This guidance comes particularly as we allow God and the means he uses to create and mature his people to shape how we work to make disciples. In other words, God's disciple-making principles should govern our disciple-making practices. To think or do otherwise is to misunderstand the nature of our partnership with God. So, what are these principles, and how do they affect our disciple-making practices?

4. How God Creates and Matures His People

I believe that God creates and matures his people (1) by his Spirit through his Word, (2) in relation to the local church, and (3) over a long period of time. To be clear, I am not claiming that these three principles represent *everything* that could be said about God's ordering of the discipleship process.[16] Nevertheless, I have chosen to highlight the principles listed because, as I trust my study will show, they are foundational to God's discipleship economy. Moreover, I fear that some overlook these particular principles due to ignorance regarding their Scriptural basis and/or the favoring of other methods. Another possibility is that some rightly grasp the importance of these principles, but implement them in ways that undermine the principles' theological integrity and unity as understood in Scripture.[17]

As submissive and dependent partners in disciple-making, we cannot turn a blind eye to the above principles as if they have no bearing on our practices. Instead, just as imperatives flow from indicatives, practices flow from principles. To make disciples well, we must allow these principles to guide and govern our practical efforts and actions, as the current of a river guides a raft. Indeed, aligning ourselves with God's sovereign ordering, not against it, glorifies God and benefits our neighbor. Thus, in the following section, I will examine the biblical grounds of each principle in Scripture and discuss how they affect the practical application of our disciple-making efforts.

4.1. By His Spirit Through His Word

The very beginning of the Bible introduces us to God's creative activity through the dual working of his Spirit and his Word. Following the statement, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1), readers learn how God accomplished this. First, "the Spirit (רוּחַ/*rûaḥ*) of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (1:2), and second, God speaks the cosmos and all living creatures, including humans, into existence (1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26) (Packer 2021, 67; Lawrence 2023). God created life and all that is using his Spirit through his spoken word. In this way, Genesis sets a pattern for how God creates, which later biblical authors pick up on: "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath (רוּחַ/*rûaḥ*) of his mouth all their host" (Ps 33:6; cf. Ps 104:30; Heb 11:3). Moreover, this pattern is not confined to the initial acts of creation but rather prepares us for how God would re-create spiritually dead humans as he

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16 For example, we could speak about God's intention to restore believers into the image of Christ/God or the place of spiritual disciplines like prayer and personal Bible reading.

17 For concrete examples of all these situations, look at my examples provided in the introduction of this article.

calls them to life.[18] This becomes particularly clear when we examine the need for, as well as the anticipation and inauguration of the New Covenant.

Humanity's need for re-creation is apparent in Scripture from the Fall in Genesis 3 onward. The biblical authors make this clear by describing man's heart as fundamentally and overwhelmingly wicked (Bavinck 2008, 4:30; 46-47). This first becomes explicit in Genesis 6 where, after generations of Adam and Eve's offspring have showcased the ill effects of sin, we read, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5). While God rightly responds to this evil in judgment through the flood, and though the flood itself was an act of re-creation, it did not change humanity's heart problem (Wenham 1994, 66-67; Waltke 2001, 127-130, 143; Dempster 2006, 73). Noah shipwrecks his legacy (9:20-24), mankind erects Babel (11:1-9), Abraham acts dishonestly (12:10-20; 20:1-18), the Patriarchs fall into folly (27:1-46; 37:3), God's chosen people venerate idols (Ex 32:1-6), Moses fails to obey (Num 20:1-13), and the list goes on. This is summarized by the words of Deuteronomy 30:6, which are promissory in scope. Still, their very existence speaks to the wretched state of humanity: "the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." Throughout the OT, it seems that no one is exempt from the need for a complete reformation of the heart. Yet, there was hope. As Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck (2008, 4:47) notes:

> …as apostasy, unfaithfulness, and the hardness of people's hearts became more and more evident in history, the prophets stressed with increasing forcefulness that an inner change had to come… And in that respect, human beings of themselves are unable to bring it about… But what human beings cannot bring about in themselves or others, God will do in the future.

The prophets emphasized this "inner change" that anticipated the New Covenant. Ezekiel in particular has much to say.

In Ezekiel 36-37, God's people are described as being spiritually dead. Specifically, they are depicted as dry bones and buried in the grave (37:3; 11-14) due to their idolatry and exile (36:18-19) (McGregor 1994, 740). And yet, despite their dead state, God commits to recreating them. Beginning in chapter 36, God promises to give his people a new heart by the working of his Spirit: "And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (Ezek

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18 "The Triune God produces all things in creation and new creation by his Word and Spirit" (Herman Bavinck 2008, 29).

36:26-27). As this promise makes clear, the result of God's life-giving work is the ability to walk in his ways, something Israel had been incapable of doing since their inception as God's people. God would cause them to be born again. Ezekiel 37 depicts how this would take place (Leeman 2016, 35-36; Lawrence 2018, 60; Taylor 1969, 228).

Here, the process of bringing the dead Israel to life involves two steps (Taylor 1969, 228-229). First, after surveying the utter hopelessness of the situation (the bones are, in fact, "very dry"; 37:2) (Taylor 1969, 230), God tells Ezekiel to prophesy his word to the bones (37:4-6). This word is a summons to life. Just as God spoke and created all things in Genesis 1, when Ezekiel preaches God's word, flesh forms (37:7-8). But the formed bodies were lifeless (37:8); the work was incomplete (McGregor 1994, 741). Thus, second, God commands Ezekiel to "prophesy to the breath (רוּחַ/*rûaḥ*)… that they may live." When he does this, the bodies come to life. Just as the Spirit joined with the word in Genesis 1-2 to create, so here, by God's Spirit through his preached Word, re-creation occurs, and the spiritually dead are brought to spiritual life (Dever and Gilbert 2012, 27). This scene depicts how God would bring his people out of the grave and give them a new heart (37:11-14). Consequently, with this promise in hand, Israel was left to wait for God to enact his promise in the New Covenant.

This brings us to the New Testament, where the principle of the Spirit and the Word remains consistent as Jesus inaugurates the New Covenant. Jesus, following his death and resurrection, left his disciples to be his witnesses to make more disciples (Acts 1:8; Mt 28:18-20; Jn 15:26-27). In Acts 1:8 specifically, we learn that being a witness for the risen Christ depends on the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus told his disciples, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses." This teaches that the disciples' ability to testify to the truth of Christ in a meaningful way was predicated on the giving of the Spirit and the power that he bestows. Why was this the case?

First, before Acts 1:8, Jesus claimed that the Spirit would come to teach and guide the disciples into the truth.[19] J. I. Packer has an excellent discussion in his classic *Knowing God*. He summarizes this aspect of the Spirit's work by saying, "Christ sent the Holy Spirit to [the disciples], to teach them all truth and so save them from all error, to remind them of what they had been taught already and to reveal to them the rest of what their Lord meant them to learn" (Jn 12:49-50; 14:26; 16:12-14; 17:8, 14). Significant for our purposes, he connects the idea of the Spirit's teaching ministry with the disciples' ability to act as Jesus' witnesses: "when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth… he will bear witness about me. And you also will bear witness" (Jn 15:26-

19 For the connection between witnessing (as seen in the previous paragraph) and the Spirit's teaching ministry as outlined in this paragraph, I am indebted to Packer 2021, 70.

27). According to Packer, this is what we call the Spirit's work of "*revealing* and *inspiring*" the truth, the net result being the New Testament (the written record of the apostle's teaching) and the message of the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor 2:9-13) (Packer 2021, 70-71). Thanks to this, once Christ ascended and sent the Spirit, the disciples were able to "communicate [all truth] with all truthfulness" (Packer 2021, 70).

Second, the Spirit's role is that of "*illumination*," opening blind eyes to behold the "light of the gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor 4:4) (Packer 2021, 71). This happens as the gospel's truth, the word of God, is proclaimed. In the words of Anthony Hoekema (1994, 89), the Spirit accomplishes this work by "(1) opening the heart and thus enabling the hearer to respond (Acts 16:14), (2) enlightening the mind so that the hearer can understand the gospel message (1 Cor 2:12-13; cf. 2 Cor 4:6), and (3) bestowing spiritual life so that the hearer can turn to God in faith (Eph 2:5)."[20] In this way, as the Spirit led the disciples into all truth and enabled them to proclaim the word of the gospel, the Spirit also worked in the recipients of the Word to create life from dry bones. Or, as Paul says, "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6; cf. 1 Cor 2:1-5).

Far from being abstract theological realities with no real-world counterpart, these truths are displayed dramatically in Acts 2 on Pentecost (Lawrence 2023). Here, what Acts 1:8 anticipated (and for that matter, passages like Deut 30:6; Ezek 36:26-28; 37:1-14) came to fruition: The Spirit came and filled God's people (2:1-4). While all those who were present and filled with the Spirit acted as Christ's witnesses through speaking in tongues (2:4), Luke particularly highlights Peter (e.g., 2:40), who preached a sermon and proclaimed the word of the gospel (2:14-40). As Peter preached, Luke notes that his listeners were "cut to the heart." As a result, over 3,000 people responded to the gospel with repentance and faith (implied in baptism) and were counted among God's people (2:37, 41). It is not a stretch to connect this cutting of the heart and conversion to the work of the Spirit as the Word was proclaimed. What Ezekiel anticipated came to fruition. In Bavinck's (2019, 394) words, "Although in a preparatory way they were united earlier, Word and Spirit on the day of Pentecost were fully and definitively united." God creates his people by his Spirit through his Word.

Finally, the same means by which God creates his people is the same means by which he brings them to Christlike maturity. Having been given a new heart, believers begin to live in line with their new desires and lead God-honoring lives. This happens by God's Spirit through his Word.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that

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20 See also Boice and Ryken 2009, 135-154.

the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Here, the dual working of the Spirit and the Word is present in Paul's description of the nature of Scripture: "breathed out by God" (θεόπνευστος/*theopneustos*). This word is a combination of the Greek words θεός/*theos* ("God") and πνέω/*pneō* ("to breath"), meaning, among other things, that the Spirit's work stands behind the formation of the Christian Scriptures and, therefore, he is its source (Knight 1992, 446-447; Ward 2009, 78-89). In Paul's opinion, this spiritual reality determines Scripture's utility, namely to bring men and women of God to a state of increasing Christian maturity in which they are equipped to do what God desires of them (Knight 1992, 450). This happens as the God-breathed, Spirit-inspired Word is used for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Thus, the testimony of Scripture is that God creates and then matures his people by his Spirit through his Word.[21]

The above principle implies that Word-based ministry should take center stage in our disciple-making practices. Since discipleship concerns how God creates and matures his people by his Spirit through his Word, it is only logical that we prioritize God's Word in our disciple-making efforts. This is not to say that Word-based ministry is the only means of disciple-making. Still, it is to say that Word-based ministry should rightly, based on the theology of Scripture, have a place of prominence in our ministry and not be subverted or minimized due to the prioritization of other means and methods. Nevertheless, the concept of Word-based ministry could mean various things. What does it look like?

In the New Testament, we find examples of the Word-based ministry that every believer should exercise both through evangelism toward unbelievers and edification toward believers (Griffiths 2017, 45-49). Regarding evangelism, Peter, speaking to Christians in general, reminds them: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9). Again later, in the same letter he encourages believers who face opposition to be "prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (3:15). Acts also has examples of both apostles and non-apostles proclaiming the gospel evangelistically (e.g. Acts 8:5; 13:1-14:28; 18:24-28). Regarding edification, believers are supposed to allow the Word to dwell richly in them, and so minister the Word to one another through admonishment in all wisdom and singing the truth to one another (Col 3:16). Christians are supposed to speak the truth to one another (Eph 4:25), building others up and so giving grace to them (Eph 4:29) (Leeman 2016, 166). While more could be said on the

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21 For more on how Scripture is used by God to mature his people in Christlikeness, and specifically how "theological reflection" on Scripture causes us to behold God and so be transformed into his image see Jamieson and Wittman 2022, 3-40.

Word ministry of all believers, this suffices to show that all believers have a place in God's plan to make disciples by his Spirit as they minister his Word.[22]

Yet, there is another form of Word-based ministry that is distinct from the general Word-based ministry of all believers: preaching or the "*public proclamation of God's word.*"[23] Jonathan Griffiths insightfully notes that none of the Greek verbs used for preaching in the NT are used to "frame an instruction, command or commission for believers, in general, to 'preach.'"[24] Instead, according to Griffiths, preaching is exercised by and, in some cases, commanded to individuals in a position of recognized authority, such as Jesus (Mk 1:14-15), the apostles (1 Cor 15:1-14), Timothy (2 Tim 4:2), and, by implication, pastors (2 Tim 2:2).[25] This fact distinguishes preaching as a particular form of Word ministry that only some believers, and indeed not every believer, are expected to carry out.[26]

Just as the general Word-based ministry of all believers is for evangelistic and edification purposes, so is the Word-based ministry of preaching. In addition to the examples of Ezekiel and Peter in my survey of the Spirit and the Word above, we do not have to search far for examples in Scripture of preaching that leads to conversions. For instance, Paul, recounting his experience in Thessalonica, reminds the church: "Our gospel came to you not only in word but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction… And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess 1:5-6; cf. Tit 1:1-3; 1 Cor 2:1-5). Moreover, the Bible demonstrates that the preaching of the Word was used in the gathered assembly of local churches for the believers' edification and growth. This is clear from passages like 2 Timothy 4:2, where, on the heels of Paul's comment on the nature and utility of Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17), Paul commands his protégé to "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." This command was the "precise way" (Griffiths 2017, 55-56) in which Timothy, as a church leader in Ephesus, was to use the Scriptures for the good of the gathered church.[27] In short, God uses preaching as

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22 For more on this, see Griffiths 2017, 46-47; Leeman 2016, 159-170.

23 This is Griffith's "working definition" of preaching which, though it does not encapsulate all of his conclusions on what preaching is, is sufficient to encapsulate what I mean to refer to in this article. For a fuller idea of what preaching is according to the NT and in biblical-theological terms, I would highly recommend reading Griffiths 2017, 17, 120-133.

24 This is based on the Greek verbs in the NT that are used for preaching that Griffiths chooses survey in his lexical study. For more see Griffiths 2017, 36.

25 Griffiths 2017, 35-36, 47-49.

26 For a detailed and nuanced discussion on this interplay between the Word ministry of all believers and that of preaching as designated in the NT to particular believers see Griffiths 2017, 47-49.

27 Notice how the description of Scripture's usefulness is matched by the commands which follow "preach the word." This is noted by Griffiths 2017, 55-56.

a distinct form of Word-based ministry given to recognized Christian leaders[28] to create and then mature his people.[29]

It follows that if God creates and matures his people by his Spirit through the Word-based ministry of preaching, then the type of preaching that forms disciples has Scripture as its source. Another term for this is "expositional preaching." To exposit something is to bring out what is already there, to expose it. When put in the context of preaching Scripture, I find David Helm's definition the most helpful: "Expositional preaching is empowered preaching that rightly submits the shape and emphasis of the sermon to the shape and emphasis of the biblical text" (Helm 2014, 13). Helm's point is that, for preaching to be expositional, the structure of the biblical text and the argument the biblical author is making in the text must dictate the structure and argument of the preacher's sermon. He continues, "In that way it brings out of the text what the Holy Spirit put there… and does not put into the text what the preacher thinks might be there" (Helm 2014, 13). In other words, an expositional approach not only conforms to the biblical text but also protects the preacher from eisegesis, or bringing his agenda to the biblical text and so potentially hijacking it for purposes that fall outside the scope of the text's intended purpose. Put differently, expositional preaching, by its very nature, roots the content of the preacher's preaching in God's word and safeguards him from preaching his message, which cannot accomplish what only God's Spirit-empowered Word can.[30] While much could be said on the practicalities of expositional sermon preparation (and there are many commendable resources on this topic),[31] my point here is that if we want to make disciples, we need to engage in, whether as preachers or listeners, the *expositional* preaching of Scripture.

In summary, this first principle of disciple-making is that God creates and matures his people by his Spirit through his Word. Scripture's witness to this reality should move us to engage in Word-based ministry in general and preaching in particular in our efforts to make disciples. Specifically, the type of preaching we should practice and sit under should be expositional, for it serves to help us speak

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28 I specifically mean, in the post-apostolic age, pastors/elders. Space does not allow me to develop this further. For more, see Griffiths 2017, 53-55.

29 Due to space and the fact that this is not an article primarily on preaching, I have not discussed why preaching is not only a distinct form of Word-based ministry but an essential form to God's discipleship economy. My hope is that the command for non-apostolic pastors like Timothy to preach, the fact that Timothy was to pass that ministry on to other faithful men (2 Tim 2:2), and the mere reality of preaching's pervasive presence throughout all of Scripture as a regular practice of leaders among God's people would suffice to convince you that preaching (whether actually doing it or sitting under it) be essential to the diet of every disciple of Christ. And yet, I fear that for some this is not enough. For more on the essential nature of preaching and the fact that God intends for his written Word to be preached see Ash 2010, 23-34.

30 For an argument on the preached word as God's actual word see Leeman 2016, 39-41; Griffiths 2017, 58-60.

31 Visit https://simeontrust.org/; see also Helm 2014; Dever and Gilbert 2012.

God's word, which, when joined by his Spirit, gives life to God's people and grows them in Christ-like maturity. All of this naturally leads to our second point.

4.2. In Relation to the Local Church

To state that "God creates and matures *his people* by his Spirit through his Word" is simply another way to describe how God forms the church. The term "God's people" is a synonym for the church. Specifically, it refers to what theologians call the "universal church," that is, all of God's people across space and time. Moreover, the universal church is not currently a visible reality.[32] Christians know this from their experience. All God's people from all time and every place are not gathered together here on earth. For that reality, we wait for the day when the redeemed from every tongue, tribe, and nation assemble in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev 7:9-10). In contrast, what we currently behold are glimpses of this invisible reality through what we call "local churches."[33] Just as the dual working of the Spirit and the Word creates God's people and joins believers to Christ in a mystical, invisible sense, so this dual working forms local churches.

In his brief but impactful book, *Understanding the Great Commission*, Mark Dever argues that throughout the book of Acts, "wherever the gospel goes, churches show up" (Dever 2016, 18). This begins in Acts 2, as Peter preached and over 3,000 people were not just added to the universal body of Christ, but geographically to the church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:11; 8:1). Preaching and the subsequent formation of churches then continues throughout the book as local churches form in Antioch (11:20-26), Lystra and Iconium (14:1, 7, 21, 23), Corinth (18:8), and Ephesus (see 19:1-9, 17-20 and compare with 20:17) (Dever 2016, 18-19). Even outside of the book of Acts, we read NT letters written to local churches, which were formed throughout the history of the early church by the preaching of the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:2; Phil 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1). The Spirit working through the Word inevitably creates local churches.[34] And yet, church planting does not

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32 Here and in the rest of this paragraph, I draw from Dever 2016, 9-10.

33 For a helpful discussion on the local church as the visible representation of the universal church and the local church as a concept in the NT see Leeman 2020, 41-97.

34 I admit, there is more to the forming of a local church than the Word rightly preached. As many have historically claimed, the marks of a true church are "the right preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper" (Dever 2012, 21). To be more concrete, the universal church becomes visible first as it is created and gathered by the Word but then second through participation in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Scripture's witness is that baptism and the Lord's Supper act as the God-ordained practices which mark off the people of God from those who are not his people. By "mark off" I do not mean that the ordinances have a salvific function, for they only point to the realities of the gospel which we believe by faith and so become a part of God's people. Rather, the ordinances, when rightly practiced, make God's people visible in a public sense. They are observable acts in which God's people participate which distinguish them from those who do not. When practiced in conjunc-

cease with the end of the book of Acts. How does the Word continue to go forth to create and mature God's people and form local churches?

In God's ordering of things, I believe that God employs the Word-based ministry of local churches as the primary means of making disciples and planting churches. As I already established, the ministry of the Word is not just for the apostles, nor is it only for leaders, but it is for all of God's people. Additionally, given that Word-based ministry is the means God uses to create and mature his people, we can conclude that God employs the Word-based ministry of all of his people to accomplish this. And in this sense, we can say that God uses the Word-based ministry of local churches to form other local churches. This takes place as pastors of local churches teach the Word and equip the members of those churches to minister the Word to one another.[35] This perpetuates growth in Christ-like maturity and theological understanding, leading to more disciple-making and church planting, where this process continues. This cyclical nature of Word-based ministry is God's plan for disciple-making. Let me explain in more detail.

In the New Testament, God has established that certain men, whom we commonly refer to as pastors, lead and oversee local churches.[36] How do they do this? One of their primary responsibilities and a qualification that distinguishes them from everyone else is the practice of teaching ("an overseer must be… able to teach," 1 Tim 3:2; cf. Tit 1:9; Acts 20:17-35). Also, as I discussed previously, a significant way such teaching takes place is through the regular preaching of God's word in the gathering of a local church (e.g., 2 Tim 4:2). Thus, regardless of what we may think it means for pastors to lead a church, biblically speaking their leadership is expressed through their ministry of the Word which includes preaching.

Yet, formal preaching is not the only way pastors exercise their teaching role in a church.[37] Teaching can take many forms. Paul exhorts Timothy to teach authoritatively (1 Tim 4:11). Then he says in the same breath, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (4:12). Timothy was to teach verbally but also visually through his

tion with the right preaching of God's word, local churches have clear boundaries and are made discernable. While this is essential to understanding what makes a local church a church, for the sake of brevity, my point in this article is to simply demonstrate that there is a direct line from the universal church to the local church as its temporary and visible manifestation. For more on the ordinances and the visibility of the church see Jamieson 2015; Dever 2012, 21-38; Schreiner 2015a, 91-106; Schreiner 2015b, 131-144.

35 This is the overarching argument of Leeman 2016.

36 I am of the conviction that the words "overseer/ἐπισκοπή," "elder/πρεσβύτερος," and "pastor/ποιμήν" are used synonymously used throughout the NT to refer to the same office which most Christians today refer to as pastor. Moreover, I also hold that the biblical vision is for men in particular to hold this office and so oversee and lead local churches.

37 "Sermons are necessary but not sufficient… it is the word of the gospel that is sufficient rather than any one particular form of its delivery" (Marshall and Payne 2021, 102-103). See also Colman 2010, 47.

example of godly living. In this same vein, the life-on-life teaching and training that defined our Lord's earthly ministry (Mk 8:38) is reflected in the ministry of leaders throughout the New Testament. For example, Paul frequently calls others to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6). Thus, imitation is a form of teaching alongside oral communication. Additionally, Paul taught not only in public but also in private settings. When departing from Ephesus, Paul reminded the Ephesian elders, "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and *from house to house*" (Acts 20:20; *emphasis mine*). These examples demonstrate that the Word-ministry of pastors is not confined to the public gathering of the church only but is "inescapably personal and domestic" (Marshall and Payne 2021, 107). The pastor's teaching ministry is holistic and is exported through his public preaching, private encouragements, and speechless life.

As the pastor teaches the Word, it equips the church members to do the work of ministry. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul claims that God gave various gifts to the church, including pastors/teachers, for a particular purpose: "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood…" (Eph 4:12-13). As the pastor(s) of a local church leads through Word-based ministry, this trains the members of that church to carry out the duties of ministry that God has assigned to them. This certainly includes ministering the Word to one another, as previously discussed. In this way, the pastor's Word-based ministry fuels the Word-based ministry of a local church's members. This occurs in two spheres: inside and outside the regular public gathering.

Throughout the Bible, God determines and orders what the worship of his people should look like.[38] In the New Testament, in particular, many have historically agreed that the Word is supposed to govern and permeate every aspect of the corporate worship of a church. Christians are commanded and shown to publicly preach the Word (2 Tim 4:2; Rom 10:14-17; Acts 20:27; Lk 24:46-49; 1 Thess 5:27), read the Word (1 Tim 4:13), sing the truths of the Word (Col 3:16; Eph 5:19), pray in light of the Word (1 Tim 2:1-3; 8; 1 Cor 11:2-15), and see the word of the gospel publicly displayed in the ordinances of baptism (Acts 2:38; 41) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:17-34) (Duncan III 2011b, 65-69; Lawrence and Dever 2009, 236-240). Note that most of these Word ministries do not exclusively belong to pastors but rather are extensions of the entire congregation ministering the Word to itself for its edification.

Practically, this affects and equips each church member to minister the Word outside of the Sunday service. As the church gathers to bathe in the Word, it then scatters, bearing the fragrance of the Word. Put differently, the church gathering

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38 For more on this see Duncan III 2011a, 17-50; Carson 2002, 11-63.

around the Word prepares the church to live in response to the Word and equips the church to speak the truths of the Word. Members get involved in each other's lives (Acts 2:42-47; Rom 12:3-13; Col 3:12-17; Eph 4:25-5:2) and hold each other accountable (1 Cor 5:1-13; Mt 18:15-20). Members also exhort one another to flee from sin (Heb 3:13), comfort the suffering with God's promises (1 Thess 4:18), and counsel the confused and wayward with God's wisdom (1 Thess 5:14). Parents are better enabled to raise their children in the care and admonition of the Lord (Eph 6:4; Col 3:21). Older men are equipped to invest in younger men (Tit 2:2, 6), and older women to lead younger women (Tit 2:3-5). When the authority and the ministry of the Word control the gathering of a church, as Colin Marshall and Tony Payne (2021, 100) state, "The congregational gathering becomes not only a theatre for ministry… but also a spur and impetus for the worship and ministry that each disciple will undertake in the week to come."

Finally, a congregation that is equipped by the Word is ready to share the good news of the gospel evangelistically. Only as believers understand the gospel are they able to proclaim it and, as Peter says, "to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15). As members of a local church minister the Word to each other and grow in godliness, their corporate life of service fosters unity and unity results in an evangelistic witness: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34-35) (Dever and Dunlop 2015, 38-39). While much could be written about the practical outworking of Word-based ministry in a local church, I think this sufficiently demonstrates that the local church is essential to God's discipleship economy. Thus, we can claim that God creates and matures his people through his Spirit through his Word *in relation to the local church*.

This principle has implications for our disciple-making practices, a few of which I will highlight here. First, as Christians seek to make disciples, our efforts should never be without the local church in view. While many ministries focus on evangelism (a reasonable and necessary endeavor), some have conversion as their end goal, excluding the vital role of the local church in a convert's life. The work of discipleship does not end when God's Spirit recreates an individual through his Word; rather, it is just the beginning. For any disciple to continue to grow, they must be connected to a local church. We should proclaim the gospel to see many saved, and if we genuinely care about them, we will walk with them to ensure they become church members.

Second, a comprehensive Word-based ministry should take center stage in the life of a local church. This begins with pastors devoting their time to the study of God's word and the teaching of God's word, both publicly and privately. As the church gathers on the Lord's Day, its corporate worship should center around the

Word. Even the songs a church sings corporately should be theologically accurate and rich, for they function to catechize God's people (Col 3:16-17). Outside of the Sunday gathering, pastors and members should encourage activities like small group bible studies, engagement with Christian literature, pastoral training programs, one-on-one discipleship, counseling, and the like, all to see the Word fuel the life and growth of the church.[39] God's people are people of the Book, which should be reflected in the life of a local church.

Finally, the members of a church should do their best to free up and support their pastor(s) to devote their time and energy to studying God's word and teaching God's people. Why? This is for their benefit and growth in Christlike maturity! This might look like (as churches are able) financing pastor(s) to devote their time to this work (1 Tim 5:17). It may be members standing by their pastor with a spirit of solidarity, rejoicing for him as he engages in theological training to better serve God's people. Regardless of how this looks, in general, members should yearn for their pastor(s) to shepherd them through the Word and champion them in this work.

In summary, the second principle is that God creates and matures his people in relation to the local church. God's Spirit creates the universal and local church through his Word. This same means is then used to grow local churches in spiritual maturity. This happens from the top down as pastors minister the Word and the members engage in Word-based ministry to one another. Moreover, as the Word permeates the life of a church, it naturally leads to the dissemination of the gospel, new converts, and the possibility of new local churches. This means that church-based and Word-based ministry should always color our disciple-making practices.

4.3. Over a Long Period of Time

As the Word governs the life of a local church and affects the spiritual growth of God's people, it can be shocking to discover that God's people do not always look and act as they should. Those who are categorically changed from sinner to saint still sin; there is a need for spiritual growth. How can this be? Our Christian experience and, more importantly, Scripture present us with the tension of being and becoming.[40]

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians portrays a church that is counted among God's people despite its significant moral failures. Throughout the letter, their failures are apparent. Some of their sins included promoting factionalism (1:10-4:21), tolerating incest (5:1-13), suing one another (6:1-11), engaging in sexually immoral behavior (6:12-20), wounding others' consciences (8:1-11), commit-

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39 For more on this concept see Leeman 2016.
40 I derived the concept of "being and becoming" from Morris 2008, 90.

ting idolatry (10:14-22), and abusing the Lord's Supper (11:17-34).[41] Amazingly, despite their actions, Paul presents the Corinthian believers' pre-conversion identity ("the unrighteous;" 6:9) in the past tense ("And such *were* some of you;" *emphasis mine,* 6:11). Equally shocking, Paul also presents their post-conversion identity as a present and enduring reality: "But you were washed… sanctified… justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (6:11). The Corinthian believers were spiritually recreated by God's Spirit through the word of the gospel which Paul preached to them (2:1-5) and so can truly be called saints (1:2) even as they fail to live in line with this.[42] Despite their sin, many in the Corinthian church were true believers. And yet, this did not mean they were to be content with their inconsistencies.

Throughout the book, Paul calls the Corinthian church to remedy their failures based on their union with Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 5:7; 6:11; 7:29-35; 10:11; 11:26; 15:1-2, 10-11, 49-54). An excellent example of this is 1 Corinthians 5:7, where Paul commands, "Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened." Here, Paul stresses the Corinthian believers' identity in Christ and their need to live in line with it. They need to deal with the leaven of sin in their midst because, in reality, they are leaven-less dough and without sin in Christ. This is just one example of Paul utilizing indicatives to levy imperatives on the Corinthian church. In the words of Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner (2010, 6), "That the church in Corinth is God's church is repeated three times. Yet the Corinthians were still behaving as if they belonged to their city! Paul's aim in writing is to urge them to adopt a way of life more in accord with their true ownership." Paul's call is for the Corinthian believers to repent, grow up in Christ, and become who they truly are because of God's salvific work in their lives.

This example represents the gradual nature of growth in Christlikeness, which defines the Christian experience. The technical term for this is "progressive sanctification." Believers, having become a new creation in Christ through the dual work of the Spirit and the Word, are transformed by the Spirit through the Word into Christ's likeness over a long period of time so that their living increasingly conforms to their unification with Christ. In other words, Christians are changed instantaneously in category (sinners made saints; 2 Cor 5:17) and progressively in character. This results in at least two implications.

First, the doctrine of progressive sanctification creates a category for Christians who sin. Every believer will face an inconsistency between their union with Christ and their attitudes and actions (e.g., Rom 7:7-25). This is not an excuse to be flippant with sin (Rom 6:1-14). Instead, this is to say that as disciples increas-

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41 For an excellent overview of these issues and the book of 1 Corinthians in general see Naselli 2018, 98-114.

42 For an excellent and lengthy discussion on this see Waters 2016, 202-206.

ingly become like Christ, we can expect them to hit bumps in the road and even create some potholes along the way.

Second, the doctrine of progressive sanctification touches on believers' participation in their journey toward personal holiness. Scripture is clear that God is actively at work in the believer to conform them to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18). Yet, this does not exclude the believer's willing participation with God to reject sin and ungodliness and to lead a God-honoring life. This is why Paul can command the believers in Philippi to "work out your own salvation" while also claiming "for it is God who works in you" (Phil 2:12-13). Thus, God is working in us to make us more like Christ, so we work along with him toward that same end.

This principle that God matures his people over a long period of time affects our disciple-making practices by setting realistic expectations. Initially, this affects how we view those we are discipling.[43] As we make disciples, we can expect them to struggle with sin and need correction. We should also expect believers to repent when they sin and strive to live all of life to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Moreover, these expectations are all the more reason why every Christian should be intimately involved in the life of a local church, participating in the Spirit's transformative work through the ministry of the Word. Progressive sanctification helps us view the others we are discipling as God views them: works in progress.

This third principle also affects how we grapple with the prolonged nature of Christian growth. As we come to grips with the ramifications of progressive sanctification, it is tempting to wonder if there is a problem with our disciple-making practices. Specifically, we might question the centrality of Word-based ministry in relation to the local church because progress and growth seem to take too long to solve the problems before us. We are tempted to think that if we could just find the right ministry model or musical production, maybe then believers would not struggle with sin to the extent they do; then perhaps they would be more committed to a church; maybe then they would not need to grow in theological astuteness; then perhaps they would evangelize with more fervor. For the pastor in particular, he might be tempted to think that preparing a sermon in the book of Leviticus for Sunday is pointless, even foolish, as he hears of a couple in his church on the brink of divorce on Wednesday and a church member who cannot pay their bills on Friday. How in the world could a sermon on Old Testament sacrificial law help these people? The problem with this train of thought is that it fails to recognize these situations as discipleship issues. No matter what difficulties or flaws God's people face, they all ultimately bleed into their need for growth in Christlike maturity and the appropriation of God's promises. What the struggling couple, the poor single mother, the timid new believer, and the struggling former

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43 Though, these expectations are true of every believer, as every Christian is a disciple in the process of becoming more like Christ. For an excellent discussion with rich pastoral instructions on how Christ treats his people in light of the doctrine of progressive sanctification see Sibbes 2021.

alcoholic all need most are the regular means God uses to grow his people, which include the ministry of the Word in the context of a local church. The doctrine of progressive sanctification then reminds us that the Spirit's work to mature God's people through these means is an inherently long process that cannot be short-circuited through quick fixes. When sufferings and shortcomings abound, what believers need most is not for the church to try something innovative but to keep doing what it's called to do through the ministry of the Word in the context of the local church. That is how God has designed growth to happen. So, when progress in Christian maturity seems to be taking a long time, we need not question the principles of God's word but rather resolve to trust that God knows best and run the race set before us with endurance (Heb 12:1; 2 Tim 4:7).

In summary, the third disciple-making principle is that God matures his people over a long period of time. Having become a new creation by God's Spirit through his Word, believers are progressively sanctified so that their character begins to conform to their union with Christ. In this sense, Christians are works in progress. As such, they will continue to sin but should also be active participants in their growth in tholiness to lead God-honoring lives. Moreover, when combined with the first two discipleship principles, a correct view of progressive sanctification serves to manage our expectations as we go about the work of making disciples. We should not be surprised that the work of discipleship takes a long time, and we should persevere in doing precisely what God has called us to do.

I conclude this section by again stating my claim that God creates and matures his people (1) by his Spirit through his Word, (2) in relation to the local church, and (3) over a long period of time. While this is not everything that can be said about the discipleship process, I trust that the biblical data proves these principles to be foundational to God's ordering of the discipleship process. Additionally, as submissive and dependent partners with God in this work, these principles impose on us the implementation of (and, by implication, the rejection of) certain practices. Specifically, to make disciples, we should champion the centrality of Word-based ministry, the importance of the local church, and the espousal of accurate expectations.

5. Principled Practices and Simplicity

Disciple-making practices that flow from God's disciple-making principles manifest in submission to and dependence on the Designer of discipleship. This disposition helps to simplify discipleship for us by defining success, clarifying a biblical philosophy of ministry, and providing us with boundaries and freedom. We will look at each of these in turn.

Often, we gauge success in evangelism and discipleship on metrics such as the number of conversions or church size, but this is wrong. To be clear, we should

want to see a harvest of souls for the gospel's sake. Yet, to measure the success of ministry in this way fundamentally misunderstands the nature of our partnership with God in disciple-making. Salvation and transformation begin with God, not us. This means that the results are ultimately in God's hands.[44] When we submit to and depend on God's sovereignty as we labor for the gospel, it relieves us of a sense of failure when we do not see our desired outcomes. This is because it is possible to do God's work in God's way and not see results in the timing or manner that we want (as if we have the power to project what will happen and when it will happen). Submission to and dependence on God also safeguard us from resorting to pragmatic gimmicks to produce fruit. It anchors us in God's principles amidst the ebb and flow, the revivals and the droughts, of disciple-making.[45] All this to say, success in disciple-making is not measured primarily by the outcomes of our efforts but rather by our faithfulness to the principles of God's word. In this sense, a submissive and dependent attitude in our partnership with God helps us rightly define and measure success in disciple-making.

In correlation with this, a submissive and dependent attitude simplifies disciple-making by clarifying where we should focus our energies. Some are tempted to reinvent the discipleship wheel ten times over, constantly reforming how to reach the lost. Yet, God's sovereign ordering of the discipleship process takes the burden of innovation off our shoulders. When we understand from Scripture how God works to create and mature his people, it helps us know how to go about making disciples in a way that will be successful, as defined above. We are not left to guess what faithful gospel ministry looks like, nor are we left wondering if our techniques will work. With confidence in God's principles, we can invest how and where God wants, knowing that our toil is not in vain, regardless of the results. In this sense, God's work done in God's ways takes the guesswork out of the equation of disciple-making and provides us with a clear, straightforward, and biblical philosophy of ministry: order your practices according to God's principles.

Finally, submission to and dependence on God in disciple-making provides us with both boundaries and freedom. When principles drive our practices, they provide us with guardrails for our good. For example, as previously discussed

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44 "If we forget that it is God's prerogative to give results when the gospel is preached, we shall start to think that it is our responsibility to secure them… It is not right when we regard ourselves as responsible for securing converts, and look to our own enterprise and techniques to accomplish what only God can accomplish. To do that is to intrude ourselves into the office of the Holy Spirit, and to exalt ourselves as the agents of the new birth… *only by letting our knowledge of God's sovereignty control the way in which we plan, and pray, and work in his service, can we avoid becoming guilty of this fault.* For where we are not consciously relying on God, there we shall inevitably be found relying on ourselves. And the spirit of self-reliance is a blight on evangelism" (Packer 2008, 32-34).

45 "If we regarded it as our job, not simply to present Christ, but actually to produce converts…our approach to evangelism would become pragmatic and calculating… We must have… an irresistible technique for inducing a response" (Packer 2008, 32).

under the first disciple-making principle, since God creates and matures his people by his Spirit through his Word, it follows that the ministry of the Word is essential to disciple-making. Some might view this negatively, as a limitation, but I think this is positive. Just as guardrails serve to show us our lane while driving and keep us on track, principles help us to know our role and responsibilities so that we might faithfully execute God's will. And yet, though constraining, principles simultaneously provide us with a measure of freedom. To continue with the first principle, while Scripture sets forth a vision for what this principle looks like in practice and so provides boundaries (e.g. believers ministering the Word to one another in the context of a local church, pastors leading through expositional preaching and teaching, and more of what I discussed above), this vision is limited in its prescriptive scope, allowing us to use wisdom to contextualize its application. One pastor may choose to preach a single sermon overviewing the whole book of Romans, while another might spend one year's worth of sermons working through Romans at a slower pace. Both can be legitimate forms of expositional preaching, and the choice between the two is not necessarily a matter of faithfulness. Consider also that while all believers should minister the Word to one another, this also can take many forms. In some contexts, small group Bible study and accountability are most appropriate, while in other settings, one-on-one meetings for mutual encouragement are better. Both of these practices act as mechanisms to facilitate Word-based ministry. While Scripture provides us with a general vision for how the first principle should be applied, Scripture does not address every practical question all believers will face in every circumstance and context throughout all of history. Thus, a degree of prudential freedom in our practices is necessary and, I would argue, granted to us by God. What we learn from this is that principles do not set forth the sort of pragmatic and formulaic processes that some discipleship resources do.[46] Instead, principles, after setting boundaries that should be respected, leave room for us to use wisdom in their application. We have a measure of freedom to decide what makes the most sense in our specific context and circumstances. Given this, principles simplify disciple-making for us as they open up a whole menu of applications instead of binding us to a one-size-fits-all program. To summarize, with the boundaries set, we have clarity on the realms our disciple-making practices should inhabit. We must stay within those realms! Yet, within those realms, the possibilities of application are numerous and, often, while making sure to adhere to the prescribed and implied commands in Scripture, are matters of wisdom and context. And in this sense, submission to and dependence on God–ordering our practices after God's principles–simplifies disciple-making for us by giving us both direction and the ability to shift our practices according to our context while remaining faithful to God and his principles.

46 See Watson and Watson (2014) for example.

Conclusion

When we allow doctrine to direct our theological understanding of discipleship, we learn that to involve oneself in disciple-making is an act of faith. We have no power in and of ourselves to bring the dead to life. We also have no means in and of ourselves to cause disciples to grow in maturity. For that, we must submit to and depend on God, allowing his disciple-making principles to govern our disciple-making practices. And in doing so, we have to trust that God will do what he has promised to do by his ordering of things, even if it seems foolish to our limited perspective.

Given this, it is crucial to understand how God creates and matures his people and how this guides us in our disciple-making endeavors. First, God creates and matures his people by his Spirit through his Word. This means that we should labor in the ministry of the Word, believing that God's Word never returns void but accomplishes precisely that for which he sends it (Isa 55:10-11). Second, God also accomplishes his work in relation to the local church. Given this, we should focus our energy on the life of the local church, believing that God creates and matures his people as they minister the Word to one another. Finally, God's work of maturation takes place over a long period of time. This establishes accurate expectations for everyone involved in the discipleship process, forcing us to live by faith that, despite the prolonged nature of growth, God is nevertheless at work through the means he has established. In short, God has set forth a pattern and plan for us to follow. And when we do, our submission to and dependence on him lends itself to simplicity. We can rest in God's sovereignty, allow the burden of innovation to roll off our backs, and appropriately minister in whatever context God has placed us in.

Do you want to simplify your disciple-making game plan? Do you want to labor for the gospel with confidence in God's power? Do you want to stop the tiresome search for new models and methods to fulfill the Great Commission? If your answer is "yes" to any of these questions, I encourage you to trust that God's ways are best and to walk in them.

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Benjamin D. Spector

Teološka vizija za učeništvo: Kako načela i prakse surađuju kako bi pojednostavile način na koji činimo učenike

Sažetak

U ovom članku nastojim primjenom biblijskog nauka razumjeti koncept učeništva s teološkoga stajališta i praktičnu primjenu Velikog naloga u Mateju 28,18-20. U svojem radu predlažem da stvaranje učenika započinje s trojedinim Bogom kao onim koji stvara i odgaja svoj narod prema sličnosti s Kristom. Razumije li se ispravno, ovo služi kako bi oblikovalo način na koji mi, kao Božji narod, zajedno s Bogom sudjelujemo u stvaranju učenika. Specifično govoreći, kada se shvati da je učeništvo u konačnici Božja zamisao i djelo, iz toga slijedi da bi Božji narod trebao činiti učenike u podložnosti Bogu kao i u ovisnosti o njemu. Imati ovakvu vrstu stava znači dopustiti Bogom određenim načelima procesa stvaranja učenika da upravljaju našim praksama stvaranja učenika. U ovom članku opisujem Božji proces stvaranja učenika na sljedeći način: Bog stvara i odgaja svoj narod (1) svojim Duhom po svojoj Riječi, (2) u odnosu na lokalnu crkvu te (3) tijekom duljega razdoblja. U odazivu na ova načela, Božji narod trebao bi podupirati središnje mjesto službe zasnovane na Riječi, važnost lokalne crkve i zagovaranje ispravnih očekivanja u svojim praksama učeništva. Ovaj redoslijed načela i praksi služi kako bi pojednostavio učeništvo definirajući uspjeh, pojašnjavajući biblijsku filozofiju

službe te pružajući nam granice i slobodu. Posljedično, teološka vizija za učeništvo koju predstavljam u ovom članku nešto je što kršćani očajnički trebaju razumjeti i prisvojiti budući da neprestano nailazimo na široku paletu novih metoda i modela za ispunjavanje Velikog naloga.