

Go therefore and make disciples . . .

The concept of discipleship in the New Testament

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The author, who is Professor of New Testament at the Free Faculty of Oslo in Norway and an international editor of Themelios, contributed an article last year on 'Jesus and the poor'. We are grateful for permission to publish this further article, which appeared first in Theology and Life, the journal of the Hong Kong Lutheran Theological Seminary.

The great commission in Matthew 28:18-20 has a magnificent structure. It starts with a declaration of power: 'All authority . . . has been given to me'. It sounds like the enthronement of a king. This powerful king has an important message to his people. The message consists of two sentences. The first is an order: 'Go therefore and make disciples. . .'. The second is a promise: 'And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.'

The order Jesus gives his disciples is longer and has a more complicated structure than the first and last sentence of the great commission. In the Greek text the main verb is 'make disciples'. This main verb is supported by three participles:

'going', 'baptizing' and 'teaching'. The main verb describes the aim of the work of the disciples. The participles describe the means to reach this aim. The disciples are asked to make disciples by going out, by baptizing and by teaching.

The structure of the great commission can be summarized as follows:

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| I. | Declaration of power | All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. |
| II. | Commission | Therefore go and |
| | a) goal | <i>make disciples</i> of all nations |
| | b) means | <i>baptizing</i> them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and |
| | | <i>teaching</i> them to obey everything I have commanded you. |
| III. | Promise | And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age. |

In this article I want to concentrate on the main verb in the great commission. What does it mean to 'make disciples' or to be a disciple? Very much has been said and written on the other parts of this basic text for the understanding of the mission of the church. Books and articles on Christology deal with the character of Jesus' authority as described in the NT. The command to 'go out' has been a main concern in the missiology, defining mission as crossing borders in order to proclaim the gospel for people who still have not heard it. Lots of research has been done on the meaning of baptism and on the question of basic teaching of Christian faith. The promise of Jesus has been the centre of innumerable devotions and meditations to encourage believers in an age of indifference and resistance to the gospel.

By comparison with these elements of the great commission, very little has been said and written on the meaning of the main element of this command from the risen Lord. The biblical concept of discipleship has in our church tradition been replaced by other concepts and other words. Perhaps we might learn something about our position as Christians by considering again what it meant to be a disciple in the time of Jesus and in the early church. Jesus' call to discipleship is a challenge to modern men and women — and to our traditional church life and Christian life-style.

I will put my points in the form of 13 theses with some comments added. I start with some linguistic observations.

1. 'Disciples' was the first name for the Christians

The Greek word *mathētes*, pl. *mathētai*, is used about the church in Jerusalem, Acts 6:1, and in Ephesus, Acts 19:9. In Acts 11:26 we find a very interesting sentence: 'In Antioch the disciples were for the first time called *Christians*.' From this we learn that the word we use most often, '*Christians*', was not the first name for this new group. They were first simply called the 'disciples'. This makes it clear that the group consisted of the first followers of Jesus during his ministry in Galilee and Judea, and that the newcomers to the group regarded their relationship to the risen Lord Jesus in some way similar to the relationship of the first disciples to the earthly 'rabbi' Jesus.

2. The verb *mathēteuō*, 'make disciples', is seldom used in the NT and has different meanings.

The use of this verb in Acts 14:21 is most close to the use in the great commission: Paul and Barnabas visited Derbe, where they 'preached the gospel and made many disciples'. The preaching of the gospel is here the means to make disciples, corresponding to 'baptizing' and 'teaching' in the great commission.

A striking parallel to the great commission is found in John 4:1, where 'baptizing' is the means to 'make disciples' (here not expressed by the verb *mathēteuo*, but by the expression *poiei mathētas*) during the earthly ministry of Jesus. We cannot discuss this passage at length here. In my opinion it shows that the continuity between the followers of John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus is somehow the key to the question of the origin of Christian baptism. The Great Commission itself has not the form of an institution of baptism as a new ritual, as it is traditionally understood in many churches. It refers to baptism as a well-known act of initiation.

In Matthew 27:57 Joseph from Arimathea is described as a person who had 'been made a disciple'. But we don't learn anything about the character or the conditions for his discipleship.

Very special is the context of the verb in Matthew 13:52: 'a scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of Heaven'. Normally the word 'scribe' refers to opponents of Jesus. But here it is used positively of his adherents. The 'training' for the kingdom refers to some 'school' activity among Jesus and his followers similar to the teaching activity of the Jewish scribes. The saying must refer to a special group of teachers in the Jesus group who had functions similar to the scribes. The children of the kingdom can be described as a 'school' with 'scribes'.

This leads us to the basic meaning of the word 'disciple' in the NT:

3. 'Disciple' (*mathētēs*) means 'learner', 'student'. For his adherents Jesus alone is Teacher and Master, Rabbi. A Christian is always and only a student in relation to Jesus.

The highest hope of a student in a rabbinic 'school' was to become a rabbi like his own teacher. The rabbis tried to educate disciples that in their turn might become rabbis and pass the traditions on to new disciples who could become teachers for still a new generation. This was the basic pattern for the Jewish, rabbinic tradition. It was a great honour to become a rabbi, and the position as a disciple of a famous rabbi gave the possibility to advance to be a famous rabbi yourself.

The relationship of Jesus to his disciples was different. Jesus had a unique position that could not be transferred to his disciples. 'But you are not to be called "Rabbi", for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth "father", for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called "teacher", for you have one Teacher, the Christ' (Mt. 23:8-10). This text shows very clearly that the relationship between Jesus and the disciples is compared to teacher and pupils in a school. But it also very clearly shows the difference. It is necessary to have a teaching function in the church. There are 'scribes trained for the kingdom of Heaven'. But these scribes or teachers have no special position in relation to Christ. He is always the supreme teacher. Basically all members of a church or a theological seminary are fellow students in the school of Jesus. In this respect there is no difference between pastor and layman or between professor and student.

The name 'disciples' reminds us that the church from the beginning was the 'school' of Jesus. Therefore the teaching function must be very important in the church. But the only real teacher is Jesus himself. The church is basically a fellowship of his students.

4. A disciple learns by (a) hearing his Master, and (b) doing like his Master.

Our modern word 'teacher' is often associated with a person involved mainly in theoretical instruction. But it may also imply practical training. A teacher of a handicraft should have the skill to do the work in a way that the learner can imitate. In the activity of Jesus as a teacher we find his disciples both learning by hearing and learning by doing.

The Sermon on the Mount describes a typical situation of Jesus as a teacher. Jesus is sitting, like the preacher in the synagogue, and he teaches his disciples by talking to them (Mt. 5:1-2). Their activity is listening and memorizing his words. A similar situation is described in Luke 10:38-42. Mary takes the position of a disciple listening to the teacher. Martha is not rebuked for worldly worries, and not at all for her activities in the kitchen *per se*, but for neglecting the instruction of Jesus as rabbi. Compared to his contemporaries Jesus was quite radical when he in this way included women among his disciples. Many times in the gospels we meet Jesus preaching the gospel and teaching in the synagogues and in public places, discussing with his disciples and with his adversaries in order to instruct them about the will of God and about the gospel of the kingdom. In all these situations the disciples are learning by listening to their Master.

Less obvious are the many references to the disciples when they are learning by doing. But the Sermon on the Mount and the many stories about Jesus' healings are in fact followed by an instruction for the disciples to do the same as their Master: to preach the message of the kingdom and to heal the sick (Mt. 10:7-8). The total mission of the disciples is in this way put under the heading: They should do like their Master. Jesus is an example to be imitated by his disciples.

This is stated explicitly in the story about the washing of the disciples' feet: 'You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you' (Jn. 13:13-15). This symbolic act points to the death of Jesus. His real service for his disciples is his death for them. He is the kernel of wheat that falls to the ground and dies in order to bear a rich fruit (Jn. 12:24). As an atoning death for the many, the death of Jesus is unique and cannot be imitated. But as an example of selfless service and unlimited love it has set a standard for the life of his followers. 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mt. 20:26-28).

These words correspond to the way Jesus is preached as an example for his followers in the early church. The epistles never encourage the believers to imitate some specific action of Jesus' public ministry or some special aspect of his personality. Jesus is referred to as an example because of his incarnation and his death. These show his humility, love and radical readiness to serve others, and this is applied as a call to Christian people to tolerate and honour each other (Phil. 2:1-11), to share money with each other (2 Cor. 8:7-9), to suffer unjustly if necessary for the gospel (1 Pet. 2:18-25), or to help brothers in material need (1 Jn. 3:16-18). In this way Jesus is seen as a teacher not only through his words, but also through his actions. He doesn't only give a 'doctrine', but also a new self-understanding and a new life-style to be preserved by his followers.

To be a disciple of Christ in this way is therefore not only a matter of 'inner' qualities like faith and convictions. It concerns our whole life in word and deed.

5. The disciples are chosen by Jesus.

This thesis is very short, but very important. Normally a student is the one who chooses his teacher. He can come and ask for a place in a school or he can go to another. This was not the way of Jesus. He called his disciples to follow him. The stories of Jesus calling his disciples are well known. The disciples could only give an answer to his initiative. They left everything behind and followed him. But they might also have said 'no' to his call. The rich man was called to follow Jesus, but he 'went away sad'. A man can answer the call, but only Christ himself can call to discipleship. According to John 15:16, this was important: 'You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit.'

This corresponds to Jesus' unique character and to the unique character of the church. He has chosen the disciples in a way similar to the way God chose Israel to be the blessed people and to be a blessing for others. They are not chosen because of their own abilities, but by his grace alone. The disciples should not thank their own deliberation and decisions for the privilege of being his disciples, but his undeserved choice.

6. In the earthly ministry of Jesus we should distinguish between the disciples in a narrow sense — those who literally followed Jesus — and a broader group of adherents and sympathizers. Luke 10:5-7 gives an interesting picture of the way the disciples were sent out by Jesus. They had no money, no extra shoes or clothes, and they were sent from village to village in order to preach the gospel. In other words, they were totally dependent on the hospitality of the people they met. They were in no way beggars, but they expected to be supported by those who received their message. They brought the good message of the kingdom, and they received food and shelter. The people receiving them were not made disciples in the narrow sense of 'people who followed Jesus and served him full-time'. But through their hospitality they did not only receive the messengers and their message, but Jesus himself (Lk. 10:16; Mt. 10:40-42). They belonged to a broader group of adherents and sympathizers. Without such a group of supporters who did not leave their homes to follow Jesus, the ministry of Jesus and his disciples would have been impossible. Jesus had power to multiply the bread and fish in the desert. But he did not use that power every day.

Luke 8:3 gives us a hint that some prominent women were among these supporters of Jesus. And even if the gospels are more concerned about Jesus' relationship to the disciples in the narrow sense, we get some glimpses of people supporting Jesus without leaving their homes. We have already mentioned Martha and Mary who received Jesus and served him in their own home. Zacchaeus exerts a similar function and has a similar position according to Luke 19:1-10. He receives Jesus and his followers for a meal in his home, but no hint is given that he left home and profession in order to be a literal 'follower' of Jesus. Perhaps people like Joseph of Arimathea (Mk. 15:43), Nicodemus (Jn. 3:1ff., 19:39), and many of those who experienced the healing power of Jesus and his disciples, belonged to this broader group of supporters.

The distinction between these two groups has been elaborated from a sociological point of view by G. Theissen in his book *The First Followers of Jesus* (1977).

7. In the early church only the disciples in the narrow sense and their 'following' Jesus were the models for being a Christian. It is basically wrong to think of the 'disciples' as models for some special or 'higher quality' Christians among other Christians. A Roman Catholic scholar (H. J. Degenhardt) has tried to apply the distinction between the following disciples and the resident supporters of Jesus as an argument for a distinction between ministers (*Amtstraeger*) and laymen in the church. This corresponds to an old Roman Catholic tradition of separating the 'religiosi' — priests and monks and nuns — from the laity of the church. This interpretation has been refuted as unhistorical by other scholars, including Roman Catholic scholars. In the book of Acts the word 'disciples' is without any doubt used about all the believers, not only about a limited number of them. There is a continuity between the 'disciples' in the ministry of Jesus and the primitive church in Jerusalem and the subsequent churches. They did not look upon themselves as supporters, but as disciples of Jesus, even if they were not able to 'follow' him geographically like the first disciples in his earthly ministry. All believers have this position, and every attempt to make some basic distinction between 'disciples' and 'ordinary' Christians is contrary to the biblical sources.

This observation is not only a challenge to the classical 'High Church' distinction between clergy and laity. It is also a challenge to the use of the word 'disciple' in some modern renewal movements. There is a tendency to distinguish active 'disciples' from ordinary Christians. In charismatic movements this terminology also can be used to distinguish the charismatic, Spirit-filled, Christians from the others. This is in fact just another way of putting Christians in two different classes, which very easily are given different value as first- and second-class Christians respectively. Such distinctions cannot be supported from the biblical concept of discipleship. On the contrary, the words of Jesus in Matthew 23:8-10 should warn us not to make differences of honour and position in the church. The church is the school where Jesus alone is teacher, and where we all are students only, helping each other with our different gifts to become better students.

8. The call to be a disciple meant in Jesus' lifetime to leave family, profession and property.

When James and John, Peter and Andrew, were called to be Jesus' disciples, they left their boats and could not pursue their profession as fishermen (Mk. 1:16-20). In the same way Levi had to leave his tax collector's booth and give up his profession to be a full-time follower of Jesus (Mk. 2:14).

The disciples also had to leave their families in order to follow Jesus (Mk. 10:29). In many ways and on many occasions Jesus spoke about the cost of following him (Lk. 9:57-62, 14:26-33, 18:22). The disciples were invited to share his conditions on earth. 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'

These radical demands for discipleship have always been felt as a challenge to the traditional churches. Some Christians have seen these words as a personal call to themselves. They have left family, profession and property in order to serve the Lord full-time in a new place. Others have applied them to a new community. Monks and nuns have been inspired by these demands to renounce marriage and private property. Some have even seen literal obedience to

these demands to be real Christian living in opposition to the 'secularized' patterns of church life of our time.

Even if individuals have received a genuine call to literal obedience to these words, it cannot be right to make them a general standard of the church. They cannot be separated from other important parts of the testimony of the NT.

9. A literal 'exodus' like this was not expected in the early church. Jesus' death and resurrection inaugurates a new time with new requirements for the disciples.

In his last discourse with his disciples according to Luke, Jesus refers back to the time he sent them out 'without purse, bag or sandals'. The disciples assure him that they didn't lack anything at that time. Then Jesus says: 'But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one' (Lk. 22:36). This word clearly speaks of a new period which is different from the previous period. The task of the disciples — to preach the gospel of the kingdom — is not changed. But the conditions are changed. They are now allowed to bring what formerly was forbidden. The situation is now different. They must be prepared to meet resistance, and their Master will be taken away from them.

It should be evident that the content of 'following' Jesus and being his 'disciple' has new content when it no longer refers to a relationship with a bodily present Master but with the risen, invisible Lord. When the disciples cannot literally 'follow' him from place to place, they don't in the same literal way need to leave profession, family and property. This is made clear when we see how these requirements are followed up in the early church.

10. In the early church we find exhortations, (a) to live a family life 'in Christ', (b) not to leave work and profession, and (c) to share generously and to care for the poor.

Jesus' call to his disciples to leave their family and even 'hate' father and mother, wife and children (Lk. 14:26) is of course no general command of unlimited validity. It only has relevance when these relationships prevent an absolute obedience to him. It cannot make invalid the command of the decalogue: 'honour your father and your mother', which is confirmed both by Jesus (Mk. 10:19) and by the apostle (Eph. 6:2). We find no hint that the early church encouraged people to leave their family in order to serve the Lord. On the contrary, we find many exhortations to live a family life 'in the Lord'. The new way of 'disciple' life and 'following' Jesus is fully compatible with matrimony, child education and care for the whole family (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-41; 1 Pet. 2:18-3:7). Paul knows that the other apostles, including James and Peter, are married (1 Cor. 9:5). But he also personally prefers the single state for himself and for those who have a special service for the Lord and a gift for living single (1 Cor. 7:32-35).

In a similar way the first Christians in Thessalonica are encouraged to stay in their professions and work with their hands (1 Thes. 4:11; 2 Thes. 3:6-13). Even if they remembered how the first disciples had 'left everything', this was not regarded as an example to be followed literally by everybody. Disciple life after the death and resurrection of Jesus is different. It is compatible with a secular profession.

In Acts 2:44f. and 4:32-37 many scholars have found reason to assume that the primitive church in Jerusalem abandoned private property and lived in a community of full property fellowship. But we don't find references to such a fellowship in property elsewhere in the NT. The indications in Acts should probably not be taken as general descriptions of the property conditions in the church. They generalize what occasionally happened when church members shared their property to relieve the need of the poorest among them. It was no sin to have property in the early church. But there are many warnings against greed, and the rich are encouraged to be 'rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share' (1 Tim. 6:17-19). The many exhortations to care for the poor show us that the first Christians in general were not dependent on the support of others, and that most of them had a surplus they could share with the needy. On the other hand they also show us that there were many poor people in the churches needing support from the more affluent. In Jesus' lifetime the disciples literally had to leave their property to follow Jesus. This could not have the same literal meaning in the church. Perhaps the expression 'give up' or 'say farewell to' everything in Luke 14:33 indicates the way this picture of the disciples was transferred to the early church: the call is to an inner detachment with different practical consequences. Jesus had warned against Mammon as an idol, and he encouraged practical love for neighbours in need. This encouraged a new attitude to money and property in the early church.

Through these examples we see that the radical demands for the disciples in the ministry of Jesus are not simply abandoned in the early church. They are transformed for a new situation where literal 'following' is no longer possible. Some scholars have looked upon this process as a sort of decline, due to relaxed eschatological expectations and the secularization or 'Verbuergerlichung' of the church. I think it is better to look upon this as a necessary and right development. The 'school' of Jesus simply had to change character when the Master was no longer present in the body but only in the Spirit.

11. *Life as a disciple is now 'death and resurrection' with Christ, inaugurated in Christian baptism.*

We have noticed that the exhortations concerning family, profession and property are related to the formula *en Christo*, 'in Christ'. This is a reference to the new dimension of Christian life given in baptism. Romans 6 explains that baptism is to be joined with Christ and to die and live with him. This is the basis for Christian life. It corresponds to the way Jesus talked about 'carrying the cross' to follow him or to say no to one's own life. In Mark 8:34-37 this is closely linked with Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection. The unity of Jesus' death with the 'death' of his followers is also made clear in the comparison with the kernel of wheat in John 12:23-26. Death and service for others is here connected in the same way as when Jesus washed the disciples' feet.

There is a continuity between the concept of discipleship in the gospels and the baptismal exhortations and ethical teachings of the letters. Baptism in the early church corresponds to the call to discipleship in the ministry of Jesus. Therefore it is not by accident that the Great Commission explains baptism and ethical instruction to be the means to

'make disciples' of all nations. The expression 'teaching them to obey everything I commanded you' is in the gospel of Matthew evidently a reference to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. This corresponds to the fact that the ethical instructions in the letters of the NT have more references to this text than to any other text in the gospels, and that the tradition behind the Sermon on the Mount according to Didache has been a catechetical tradition in the early church.

Baptism is therefore initiation into discipleship giving admittance to the 'school' of Jesus and starting a new life in obedience to him and his commands.

12. *To be a disciple is to be called to make new disciples.*

This is the evident implication of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19. The disciples are told to make disciples. The concept of 'discipleship' is a dynamic concept. It implies multiplication. When the disciples were sent to preach the gospel of the kingdom for Israel, they were not asked to make disciples. But now this is included in their mission. The word 'disciple' has got a new and a broader meaning than referring to those following their Master in Galilee and Judea. All nations are invited to this new fellowship. And therefore all disciples are called to this mission.

This corresponds to the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18, when he so closely connects the gift of being reconciled with God with the ministry of reconciliation. Those who have received reconciliation are also Christ's ambassadors, urging others to 'be reconciled with God'. Being a disciple is to become the co-worker of Christ in his world-wide mission. 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world' (1 Jn. 2:2).

13. *The disciples have fellowship with Christ in life and death and are the inheritors of the kingdom of God.*

A disciple is called to give up his own interests in order to obey the call of Jesus. He is also called to the world-wide, overwhelming task of making all nations disciples. Confronting this great task and his own limited resources, it is easy to lose courage and simply give up.

Therefore it is good to see that the Great Commission does not stop with the command, but with a promise. The risen, almighty Lord is with them — not only when they feel it or when they succeed, but always, to the very end of the age. The disciples live under the promise that the kingdom of God belongs to them (Lk. 12:32). They are chosen for this destination by God's own will. Therefore they should not fear nor despair. To be a disciple of Christ is a great privilege. Christ is still calling us to 'leave everything' and follow him.

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