

DISCIPLE-MAKING 101

By Andrew Wilson
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Acts 20:17-24
John 4:31-36

The main job of a leader, it's often said, is to keep people focused on the main thing. And what's the main thing for the church, according to Jesus? It's to continue the work that Jesus began. It's to build the kingdom by making disciples.

If you doubt that introducing people to God is our main job, you haven't been paying attention. There are five different places in the Gospels and Acts where Jesus spells it out for us. His mission was to introduce people to God, and he has commissioned and empowered us to do the same. We're to follow his example of training disciples who will go and make more disciples.

The Lord wants us, like Peter and Paul, like Phoebe and Priscilla, to be all in for him. He wants us to be suited up, on the field, and ready to give our all every day.

We just read the pep talk that Jesus gave to the disciples after his conversation with the woman at the well. He's offering the same encouraging message to the church every day:

“Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.”
- John 4:35

He's telling us that the Spirit has already prepared people to hear the Good News of God's love and receive Christ as their Savior. He's conferring to his followers the immense privilege of sharing the Good News and bringing people to God.

Sadly, only a small minority of Christians are actually on the field doing the work of disciple-making. Most of the rest of us are in the locker room having a pity party about the decline of the church. Some of us are wringing our hands about the decline of traditional denominations. Some of us are in despair because churches are shrinking and people in the media are saying nasty things about Christians. Some of us are all but sure the church is on its way to oblivion. And all we can talk about is the dark cloud of postmodernism, and the church's desperate search for relevance.

What's the root cause of this defeatist attitude that pervades the American church?

The single word answer is unbelief. We don't believe, many of us, that Christ truly is the world's only hope for salvation. Or, if we do trust in Christ as our Savior on a personal level we don't believe the world is interested in Christ, or that we could ever be effective in inspiring them to trust in him.

What's the cause of our unbelief? That's the question I want to ask today. There are six big lies that have infected our thinking, and that are inhibiting our work of making disciples. Satan, the father of lies, is exploiting those lies to keep us timid and fearful, and to prevent people from joining God's team.

As we look at them, I hope you'll consider how they might be influencing you.

The first big lie is that we should leave the work of evangelism to the professionals.

Like every effective lie, this one is so powerful because it's partly true. There *are* people in the church who have a special gift for evangelism. There are people that have been uniquely equipped to win people

to Christ. In this church we think of amazing servants like Phil Van Horn, Erna Hackett, Todd Hessick and Ashley Adamson. Isn't it reasonable that we should let those people take the lead in witnessing for Christ? The rest of us have other jobs to do. Isn't that Paul's point in First Corinthians when he says that the body of Christ consists of many parts – noses, arms, feet, and so on?

This argument is based on a false assumption. The false assumption is that the gift of evangelism is one that's given only to a select few people. Some gifts are like that. For example, God blesses only a few with the ability the gift of prophecy or with the ability to speak in tongues. But other gifts are distributed widely even if they're not distributed equally.

Think, for example, of the gift of hospitality. The Givens and the Wolflicks are famous for their great parties. They have the Martha Stewart touch. Mary and I wouldn't even try to compete with them. Yet all of us are sometimes called upon to be hospitable to other people. If a homeless person came to your door and asked for a sandwich, you wouldn't send her up to the Wolflick's house. You'd go to your kitchen and get out your peanut butter and jelly.

Evangelism, or the gift of sharing Jesus, is more like the gift of hospitality than it is the gift of prophecy or tongues. You may not be great at it – in fact you may feel ridiculously inadequate as a witness for Christ.

But that doesn't mean God hasn't factored you into his plan to reach out to those who don't know him.

We've got to stop leaning on the excuse that we didn't get the Billy Graham gene. There aren't enough golden-tongued evangelists to reach all of God's lost sheep. But there's another reason why God doesn't rely just on gifted evangelists. In case you hadn't noticed, pastors and evangelists don't get the kind of respect in our society that they did two generations ago.

Doug Schaupp of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship talked about that at Summit last Thursday night. I found myself nodding and grinning as he described how a person's whole demeanor will change when they learn that he's a full time evangelist. He says, "The side of their mouth sort of tenses up and one of their eyebrows starts to twitch." I've seen that awkward look many many times.

Most of you don't get that look when people find out what you do. You don't have to overcome the negative stigma of being a church professional. You can stand with people closer to the places where they live. You can get to know them in ways that are sometimes closed off to people like me. And after you've opened your heart to them, and they've learned to trust you, you have the opportunity to share Jesus with them in language they can understand.

The second big lie is that only the mega-churches have the resources to reach people.

Like the first big lie, this one is seductive because it's partly true. Bigger churches *can* do more. They have more money. They draw from a larger talent pool. They can offer a wider range of ministries, and carry them off more effectively. So they mostly do a better job than small churches in drawing in new people.

For all those reasons, I'd love to see continued growth in our fellowship at LCPC. And I keep hoping that some of the struggling churches in our presbytery will combine their membership and resources and start new churches.

But it's a great big lie to say that small or mid-size churches can't be effective in disciple-making. There are several crucial points to consider.

First, our growth as Jesus followers mostly occurs in the context of a very small circle of support. It isn't enough for us to show up to worship once a month or even once a week. Nor is it enough to combine prayer and personal Bible study with worship.

If we want to grow to resemble Jesus, and become productive members of his team, we have to connect with a small group of Christ followers. That's especially true for new Christians, but it's also true for mature Christians who are experienced field workers. We all need a group of fellow travelers that's committed to praying together, to doing some kind of outreach together, and to working through life's junk.

After all, isn't that what Jesus did with his very first disciples?

Many mega-churches learned a sobering lesson about discipleship over the past couple of decades. Willow Creek is just one example of many that were so focused on bringing in seekers that they neglected the small stuff. What they discovered at those seeker-magnet churches, over time, is that very few people were actually growing in their faith. They were showing up on Sunday, and were excited about what they were experiencing. But they weren't connecting with discipleship groups where they could be challenged, and where they could live out their faith in practical ways.

I'm not interested in slamming big churches. We should ask God's blessing on any church that's obeying Christ commandment to make disciples, regardless of its size.

My point is that virtually every church has the means to be a growing body. Jesus changed the world with his small group of twelve. The Apostles lacked most of the resources that we have come to think of as essential for church growth. They had no sound equipment, no vans and no VBS props. They worked for little or no pay. In fact, they didn't even have the New Testament to guide their preaching and teaching. But they somehow managed to light a fire that's still burning around the world.

One key reason for their success was that they loved each other and shared life together. They also never lost sight of the main goal – that of making disciples who themselves would make disciples.

The third big lie is that affluent Americans no longer need Jesus.

Of course it's true that Americans today are less religious. They're less attached to religious institutions, particularly to Protestant denominations, than at any time in our nation's history. One statistic helps to fill out the broad picture. The 2009 American Religious Identification survey found that the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent.

In the light of such data, many opinion-makers in the secular media have concluded that the institution of the church is becoming irrelevant, and that traditional Christianity will soon be dead.

The trends are troubling. Yet we shouldn't let ourselves get discouraged. We shouldn't be taken in by the argument that fewer people are identifying themselves as Christians because Christ is irrelevant, or because his church has nothing good to offer them. Instead, we should realize that a huge opportunity has opened up for disciple-making. Millions of people are feeling deeply unsettled, and are awakening to their desperate need for God. If we love these people as God loves them, we'll go looking for them. We'll try to befriend them and introduce them to Jesus.

The cultural shifts we're witnessing are profound. As American society fractures it becomes less tethered to Judeo-Christian traditions. But the central problem of humanity hasn't changed in America, or

anywhere else, since the dawn of history. We've all sinned. We've all fallen short of God's glory. And it's our privilege, in this time of confusion and despair, to show people how they can have peace with God.

The fourth big lie is that people would come to Jesus if we did a better job of transmitting our wonderful church traditions.

Back in the nineties there were still a lot of life-long Christians who believed this. They thought the traditions attached to Christianity were more important than Christianity itself. They said: "If we could just expose people to all the things that I love about the church –the gorgeous sanctuary, the Bible-based hymns, the 50s era portrait of Jesus in the Sunday School classroom – they'd eventually fall in love with church. Then they'd fall in love with God."

Most Christians now understand the weakness of that approach. For a huge number of people outside the church, many of our cherished church traditions and trappings have become impediments to faith. Churches that cost kazillions of dollars to build are nearly empty on Sunday mornings, while gymnasiums housing start-up churches are packed. The hymns and anthems that have nurtured Christians for countless generations now put many people to sleep. What hymns and traditional worship communicate to them is: "The church is stale, boring, out-of-date and out-of-touch."

Of course that isn't true for everyone. Besides, many of our traditions are worth keeping. The fact that new people don't like them is reason enough to re-consider them, but not necessarily to discard them. It takes a lot of wisdom to know what to hang onto, and what to lay aside.

Let me suggest two principles that I think should guide us.

First, if we decide to hang onto a particular tradition that young people or seekers don't appreciate, we should try hard to make it more accessible. The burden is on church leaders to help people to see how an old tradition that some aren't connecting with can help us in our walk with Christ.

Second, if we decide to lay aside a particular tradition, it should be because it's keeping us from accomplishing our main task, which making disciples. The fact that some people don't like the tradition isn't, in itself, a sufficient reason to give it up.

The main point is that tradition isn't the thing we worship; it isn't the source of hope and life. When tradition somehow keeps people from coming to God, it's time to let it go.

The fifth big lie is that people would come to Jesus if we were nicer people.

Jesus wasn't always nice to people. He often went out of his way to be provocative. He asked questions that made people squirm. His goal, in so many of his encounters with others, was to stir them up so they could see God and themselves in a new light.

When it comes to making disciples, there are times when we need to take the same risks with others that Christ takes with us. This is a delicate but important issue and I want to explore it with you in depth in my next message. The main point, for now, is that it's a cop-out to say you're fulfilling your calling to help people to know Jesus by being nice to them.

Most of the people I know, whether or not they're Christians, are fairly good at being nice. If we want people to know Jesus, we have to show them something more than nice. We have to practice forgiveness, and love our enemies. We have to be generous with the poor and treat even the least among us with

respect. We have to show genuine interest in the other person and keep our tendency to judge in check. But even beyond those things, we usually have to take the risk of offending someone by getting personal, and by sharing our intimate faith in Jesus.

The sixth big lie – the last – is more subtle and insidious than all the others. It's that *if I try to introduce people to Jesus I'll only succeed in driving them further away from him.*

I saw a cartoon recently that captures the attitude that most people have about evangelism. Several people in the cartoon are standing at a bus stop. One plus-size guy is wearing a tee shirt that says in huge letters, "LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT JESUS." He's saying to a person who is staring at him from a distance, "I wear it because it guarantees me a seat to myself."

We have to be careful in the way we talk about our faith. We have to exercise wisdom, boldness and discretion. In my next message I'm going to suggest some things you can do to get in line with the Spirit and be an effective witness. This week I'm going to end with some ideas that are intended to make you squirm.

We need to pay attention to what the Lord is saying to us, personally, about making disciples. He's saying, first, that the fields are ripe for picking. That means that there are people in our circles of influence who are ready to turn to Christ and receive new life. If we refuse to reach out on the grounds that people aren't interested in Jesus, we're flatly contradicting Christ's word to us.

Christ is telling us, second, that the harvesting is to be done by us. If we refuse to harvest in the field that's right in front of us, we're basically saying to Christ, "Find someone else. Call a different disciple because you and I have different priorities."

At that point the questions we should be asking are: What if no one else is available? What if everyone else is digging in their heels just like me? What if there are people in my life who need to hear the Good News, and aren't ever going to hear it in a way that makes sense to them because I'm too scared to speak – too scared even to invite them to church? What's going to happen to them?

We can't answer those questions. We won't know the consequences of our actions here until we're called home. What we do know is that God has commissioned us to bring others with us into the kingdom. And he promises to give us everything we need to be a success.

What does it look like to be fully engaged in God's main thing? We get a glimpse when we talk with people like Daniel Adams, Terri Hewitt, who will be with us next week, and Darren Kennedy, who will offer the message on July 29.

My desire is to resemble them in their passionate devotion. My ambition is to be so full of love for those outside God's family that I'll be able to say with Paul:

"I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

- Acts 20:22-24

Satan has spun a web of lies to keep us from fulfilling Christ's great commission. What are the lies that are holding you captive? What are the fears that are keeping you from introducing people to God?

The Lord stands ready to use you, and to use our church family, to bring in his great harvest.