

Grow L.E.A.R.N.ers WHY?

“You may be a COMMON CHURCH if ...”

(SELF-SCORING - Check all that apply)

- Your primary goal is better worship services.
- Your primary goal is to survive as a church.
- Your primary goal is to be a church that goes out into the community to serve.
- Your primary goal is to baptize new converts.
- Your primary goal is to turn around a declining church.
- Your primary goal is to be a close-knit community of believers.
- Your primary goal is high quality programming and ministry.
- Your primary goal is to implement church change.
- Your primary goal is to preserve a church's legacy.
- Your primary goal is to be known as a church with exceptional teaching.

WHAT IS THE GOAL OF A CHURCH?

I often ask my client churches to honestly tell me what they perceive as their church's primary goal. This is not a scientific poll because these churches need to grow and they realize this (or they wouldn't be hiring a church growth consultant). But, their answers may mirror yours. Look at their responses in *Figure 5.1*.

Figure 5.1 Question to Clients: “What honestly do you perceive as your church’s primary goal?”

Our primary goal is to <i>survive</i> as a church	38 %
Our primary goal is to provide a warm and caring <i>fellowship</i> .	22 %
Our primary goal is to <i>win souls</i> to Christ.	21 %
Our primary goal is to <i>influence</i> community morals for the better.	11 %
None of the above	8 %

As you can see from *Figure 5.1* the common answer is “our primary goal is to survive as a church.” This desire to survive is laudable and such honesty encouraging. Yet, with survival as a primary *goal* a church usually won’t continue to exist much longer. This cure for the common church is much bigger, for it is a church-wide refocus back to *Jesus’* goal for his church.

Jesus’ Goal for the Church

The right answer for *Figure 5.1* is actually “none of the above” and comes from Jesus’ own words. That’s right, the primary goal of every church is not to influence the community for the better, provide a warm place of fellowship, sponsor excellent teaching or even to survive. The church of God has a higher, more encompassing call (that, by the way, includes the previous three tasks).ⁱ To understand this, let’s look at Jesus’ last and most poignant instructions to his followers (*Figure 5.2* which has been called the “Great Commission”).

Figure 5.2 Jesus’ Great Commission (Matt. 29:18-20 CEB)
(commissioning verbs are underlined)

<p>Jesus came near and spoke to them, “I’ve received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, <u>go</u> and <u>make disciples</u> of all nations, <u>baptizing</u> them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <u>teaching</u> them to obey everything that I’ve commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age.”</p>

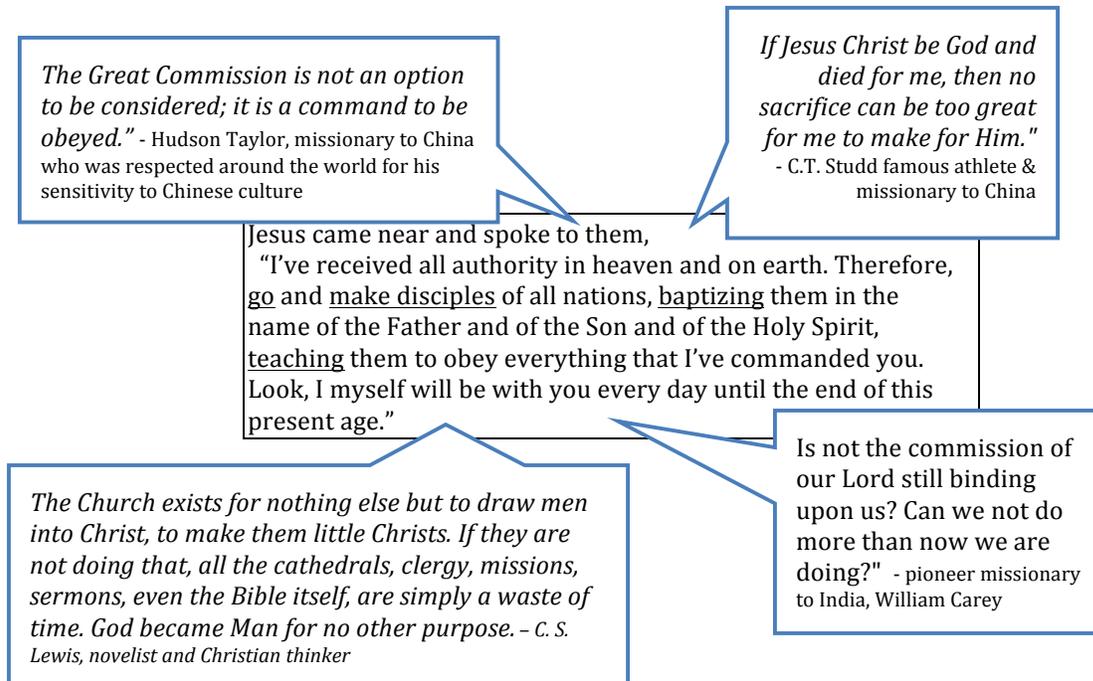
What makes this a *Great Commission*ⁱⁱ?

The *Great Commission* is the label that has been given to these final and central instructions Jesus gave his followers in *Matthew 28:18-20*. In this phrase Jesus is literally “commissioning” or “recruiting” all followers down through the ages into his mission. This commissioning is akin to an “official directive,” a “direct order” and a “command,” such as a military conscript might receive upon entering service. In fact, military personnel reading this will no doubt remember their own commissioning into the armed forces. Veterans have told me this was a powerful

and moving experience, with one veteran stating, “You weren’t supposed to have tears in your eyes when you were commissioned, but I did. After 9-11 it was clear to me that I was no longer talking about serving my country, I was doing it! I was ready to put my life on the line for my country.”

Christians, too, are called to put their lives on the line in Jesus’ great commissioning. Here is what others have said about this passage (*Figure 5.3*):

Figure 5.3 Comments About Jesus’ Great Commission (Matt. 29:18-20 CEB) ⁱⁱⁱ

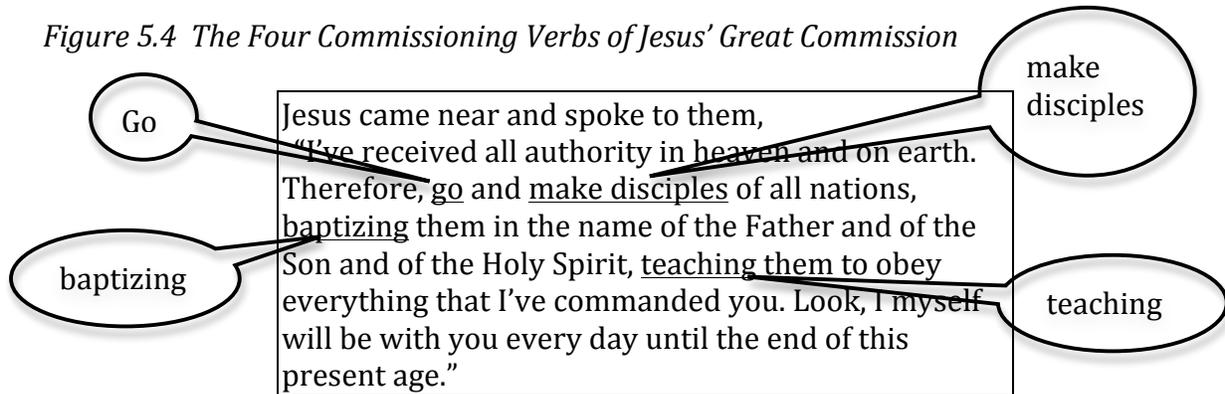


The Four Verbs of Jesus’ Great Commission

Because this Great Commission is so important, it is not surprising that each word, each phrase that Jesus uttered in *Matthew 28:19-20* seems to have been chosen carefully to convey his message. Jesus undoubtedly knew that believers down through history would return to this passage as they contemplated the goal of their spiritual community.

And, in this commission Jesus used four commissioning verbs. Because the Greek language (in which much of the New Testament was written) is much more precise than today’s English, Jesus was able to use a special wording that stressed one verb as the primary verb over the other three. In *Figure 5.4* let’s look closer at the verbs in his Great Commission and see if we can locate the one that Jesus emphasized as its central aim.

Figure 5.4 The Four Commissioning Verbs of Jesus' Great Commission



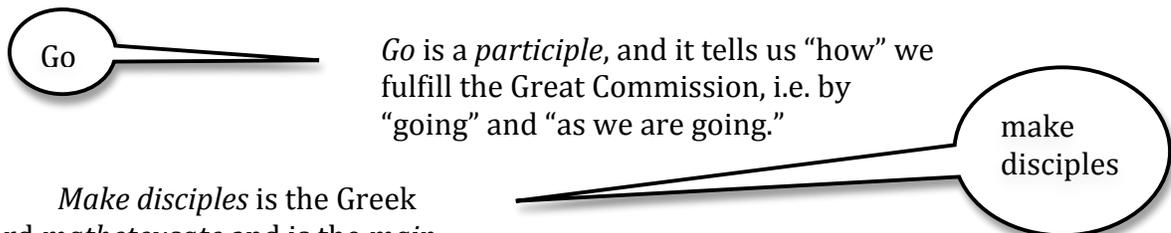
Finding the main verb

In the English, the four verbs seem equal. But, when Jesus spoke these words, he pronounced one verb with a special spelling, thereby indicating that this verb was the main verb or “goal” of the passage. Which verb was Jesus pointing to as the goal of his Great Commission? You must wait a few paragraphs to find out.

Take away the three helping verbs to find the main verb

Now, you are probably thinking, “What are the other verbs then?” The three other verbs are called *participles*, which means they are “helping verbs” that tell “how” the main verb will be accomplished.^{iv} Jesus chose specific spellings of the participles to show that three verbs are *participles* telling you “how” to accomplish the main verb.^v

So, which three verbs are participles (telling us “how”) and which one verb is the main verb (telling us the “goal”)? The spelling of the Greek verbs indicates the following:^{vi}



Make disciples is the Greek word *matheteusate* and is the *main verb* (we know this by the Greek spelling). Because Jesus pronounced *make disciples* with a special spelling he made it clear to his Greek hearers that, “Your goal is to *make disciples*, and how you make them is by going, baptizing and teaching.” Now that we’ve discovered the main verb, let’s look briefly at the two remaining participles.



Baptizing is an important “how” in making disciples, for it reminds us that baptism is a personal, public and supernatural acknowledgment of new birth in Christ.

Teaching reminds us that a key aspect of the “how” of disciple making is teaching them about their loving Father. Sometimes I find people who think teaching is the goal, but teaching is really just the process. We teach to make learners.



Therefore, the uncommon church’s goal must not be the “going,” the “baptizing” or even the “teaching.” These are the “hows.” In the words Jesus chose he made clear that for the uncommon church he was founding, it was “making disciples” that was the goal.

WHAT DO DISCIPLES LOOK LIKE?

As a young junior high student, I heard a pastor say we are to “make *disciples*.” Being an inattentive youth, I never quite grasped a correct image of what this looked like. From my rudimentary knowledge of the Bible, I pictured Jesus’ disciples and figured the church should make more longhaired individuals with beards, robes and sandals. Because the only youthful image I could conjure up were the “hippies” of the era, I wondered in my naïveté, “Was the preacher really telling for us to go out and produce more hippies?” Now this was not what the preacher intended. But the word disciple had become so archaic and tied in my mind to first century images that a modern depiction was needed.

Picturing a Disciple

To picture a disciple we begin with the Greek word *matheteusate*, which means “a learner, a pupil or an apprentice.”^{vii} It carries the image of a trainee or a student still in school more than it depicts an expert. Christ is commanding his followers not to produce experts, but rather to foster a community of authentic learners. Following Jesus should feel like you are enrolled in his school of learning. Therefore, a church is not a cadre of experts, but a collage of fellow learners.

Theologians have sought to convey the rich and multifaceted meaning of the verb: “make disciples” in several ways.

Donald McGavran^{viii} said “It means enroll in my (Jesus’) school...”

Eddie Gibbs^{ix} stated “It is learning, not simply through being given information, but in learning how to use it. Discipleship is an apprenticeship

rather than an academic way of learning. It is learning by doing.”

James Engel^x summarized... “In short, discipleship requires continued obedience over time.... Thus becoming a disciple is a *process* beginning when one received Christ, continuing over a lifetime as one is conformed to His image (*Phil 1:6*), and culminating in the glory at the end of the age.”

An Up-to-date Image of a Disciple

From a closer look at the words Jesus used, we see that the *goal* of every church is to help people become “a community of active, ongoing learners.”^{xi} It is not just to baptize or to teach as we are going out (though all of these are “hows” of the disciple making process). The goal, toward which a church should focus its attention and its resources is to produce people that are actively learning about their heavenly Father.

Still, this goal includes binding up their wounds, meeting their needs before they even know who Christ is, standing up for their justice and righting their wrongs. But all of these worthy actions if they become the goal, will make your mission misdirected. God’s goal, the purpose he has for every church, is to reconnect his wayward offspring to himself (the essence of the *missio Dei*). And, the church’s goal (*Figure 5.6*) is to foster this reunification by helping people become learners about a loving, seeking Father.

THE GOAL OF THE CHURCH DEFINED

While the common church has mistaken many “hows” for the “goal,” *Figure 5.6* is the goal against which the uncommon church will be measured. In our commissioning, Jesus has handed us a different measuring stick.

Figure 5.6 The Goal of a Church

The goal of a church is ...

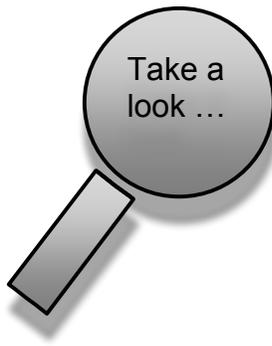
To make active, ongoing learners.

(i.e. learning about a heavenly Father who loves them, sacrificed his Son for them and who wants to reunite and empower them.)

Jesus wants the uncommon church to focus upon reuniting his wayward offspring with him by *making active, ongoing learners* about his great love, sacrifice and future for them. And so, be careful not to make some of the following common missteps.

- *Teaching without learning:* If a church is teaching many people, but few are actively learning over a long period of time, the church is not “making active, ongoing learners.”
- *Having learned once, but not learning now:* If a person has learned once, perhaps in the past at school or as a child but is not learning now, then the church is not “making active, ongoing learners.”
- *Baptizing without ongoing learning:* And, if the church is baptizing many souls, but there is little ongoing education about what it means to follow Christ, then that church is not “making active, ongoing learners.”

In the next chapter we will learn “HOW” to make learners. But, in this chapter we have seen the “WHY” is because nurturing “learners” is the goal of the Great Commission that Christ has given us.



For More Information Read:

- Appendix 5.A: *More About What The Greek Tells Us About 'Making Disciples'*

A

Endnotes:

ⁱI am not saying that winning souls to Christ is not important and central to God’s mission, for it is. As I have stated in the first chapters of this book (and in every one of my previous nine books) reuniting wayward offspring to their heavenly Father so they can receive salvation from their sin, gain new purpose and enter eternal life is the mission of God (i.e. *missio Dei*) in which we are called to participate (*Matt. 28:19-20*). However, the point I am making here is that “winning souls” is a supernatural connection that though we can help facilitate, is something only God can accomplish (see for instance *Acts 2:47* where Luke writes, “The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved”). Jesus, in the Great Commission of *Matthew 28:19-20*, gives his church not the task of soul-saving (he reserves that

right for himself), but rather gives the church the task of “making learners about him.” If a church is making learners about God, then he can supernaturally connect with them through their growing knowledge of his love and bring them into a reconciled relationship with himself. Thus, in this chapter I will show that “making learners of Christ” is the task for which the church should aim, and when we connect people with their loving Father this way, he can add “daily to the community those who were being saved.”

ⁱⁱ David Bosch has rightly pointed out that you cannot fully understand the Great Commission of *Matthew 28:19-20* without an understanding of Matthew’s gospel as a whole. The reader who wants a fuller appreciation for the power and influence of the Great Commission in context should see David J. Bosch’s chapter “Matthew: Mission as Disciples-Making” in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), pp. 56-83.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hudson Taylor quoted by Stan Toler, *Practical Guide to Solo Ministry: How Your Church Can Thrive When You Lead Alone* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2008), p. 136; C. T. Studd quoted by David I. Marshall, *To Timbuktu and Beyond: A Missionary Memoir* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2010), p. 87; William Carey quoted by A. Scott Moreau, Gary B. McGee and Gary R. Corwin in *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 201; and C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis* (New York: HarperOne, 2002), p. 96.

^{iv} Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basis of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 274-275. A good way to think of this is that the participles (go, baptizing, teaching) tell “how” making disciples is done. Thus, to the question, “How do you make disciples?” one could answer “by going (means) and baptizing (manner) and teaching” (manner).

^v The relationship between the three participles and the imperative “make disciples” has been described by Robert Culver as “the words translated ‘baptizing’ and ‘teaching’ are participles. While these participles are immensely important the imperative ‘make disciples’ is of superlative importance.” “What is the Church’s Commission,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, July 1968), p. 244.

^{vi} Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basis of New Testament Syntax* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 280 states “*a greater emphasis is placed on the action of the main verb than on the participle*. That is, the participle is something of a prerequisite before the action of the main verb can occur” (italics Wallace). In other words, the “going,” “baptizing” and “teaching” are prerequisites that must occur before the action of the main verb (“making disciples”) can take place.

^{vii} Walter Bauer, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), pp. 486-487.

^{viii} Donald McGavran, *Effective Evangelism: A Theological Mandate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1988), p. 17.

^{ix} Eddie Gibbs, *Body Building Exercises for the Local Church* (London: Falcon Press, 1979), p. 74.

^x James F. Engel, *Contemporary Christian Communications: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 66.

^{xi} The “ongoing” emphasis in *making disciples* is created by both the preface of *Matthew 28:18-20* (whereby Jesus declares his command is a result of non-temporal authority, v. 18) and by the aorist tense of *make disciples*, which can convey the sense of an action that should commence at once.