

CHAPTER 3

MAKING DISCIPLES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

My dad was a master carpenter. He built many of the houses in the community where I was born. He was a highly skilled craftsman and did excellent work. However, none of his abilities rubbed off on me. I have worked on a carpentry crew, but never quite got the hang of it. In fact, I still am not sure how the builders do it. It amazes me to watch a building go up and see how much time and attention is given to the foundation. It seems the construction crew never gets started with the building itself. Sometimes they spend months on just the hole in the ground. The bigger the building, the more time they spend working on the base that will support the superstructure.

Nearly two thousand years ago, Jesus Christ began a movement that was to spread to the ends of the earth. His gospel was to go to the noblest king and to the humblest worker. It would encompass the whole world. It was designed to reach the world with the Good News that salvation had come to men.

The Example and Commission of Jesus

Jesus Christ began His mission with a personal ministry of a little more than three years. One of the key aspects of that time was His training of the twelve disciples, whom He named apostles. That training was the foundation of His whole minis-

try. Much of His time during those three-plus years was concentrated on these men. He knew that in order for His mission to succeed, much would depend on the dedication, loyalty, courage, and faith of the men whom He had chosen and trained.

The importance of this approach was first impressed on my mind when I was a young Christian. I had gone to a Christian conference and in one of the messages the speaker was emphasizing how vital these men were to Jesus' mission. He told us a story that stirred our imaginations. He spoke of the return of Jesus to heaven—His ascension—and the excitement that it caused among the angels. He painted quite a picture, for he was good with words.

He told of one of the angels who asked the returned Son of God a question, "What plan do You have to continue the work You began on earth?"

Without hesitation Jesus answered, "I left it in the hands of the apostles."

Another angel asked, "What if they fail?"

Again there was no hesitation, "I have no other plan."

The speaker assured us it was only a story, but it got the point across. The future of Christianity, humanly speaking, rose or fell on the ministry of these men.

Jesus' last words to His disciples were, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The words *you will be my witnesses* are the key to the perpetuation of Jesus' mission in the Book of Acts. The strategy of outreach was to go first to Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth.

What must the apostles' responses to that commission have been? What was in their thinking? It certainly must have crossed their minds that Jesus' mission to them was indeed a big job. It was a big world with many people and many languages. Who among them knew how to speak to a Parthian or to a Mede? Did anyone know the languages of Mesopotamia and Cappadocia?

If they were concerned about that, they shouldn't have been. Jesus, as always, had a plan. He had told His disciples

that they should not leave Jerusalem, "but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:4-5).

The Day of Pentecost

The promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit was fulfilled ten days after the ascension. "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2:1-4).

During the Feast of Pentecost—as with other popular Jewish feasts—Hebrew men from every nearby nation would come to Jerusalem. They would stay for the feast, rejoice in the goodness and blessing of God, and depart. This particular feast was no exception, but it did contain a few surprises.

The apostles, as a result of their lives being filled with the Holy Spirit and their subsequent ability to communicate in languages other than their own, were in the streets of Jerusalem preaching the gospel.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation of the world. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked, "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" (Acts 2:5-11).

The people in Jerusalem were amazed. Many of them had come to scores of feasts through the years and had never seen or heard anything like this. Some accused the apostles of drunkenness. With that Peter stood up and preached the first sermon recorded in the Book of Acts.

He began by quoting a passage of Scripture in answer to his detractors. Here was this plain-spoken Galilean fisherman, standing in the center of Jerusalem, lifting up his voice and making the old streets ring with the message of the risen Christ. How did it occur to him to answer those mockers with a quotation from Scripture? The answer is obvious. He had walked for over three years with Jesus, and had seen Him answer His critics many times. He had spent over three years with the One who frequently quoted the Bible. Peter had learned his lesson well and now quoted the Prophet Joel (2:28-32).

Then Peter got right into the crux of the issue—the message of the gospel.

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him (Acts 2:22-24).

He preached a crucified and risen Christ, supporting what he said with Scripture.

The results were startling: "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

The test of any message is not whether it is a good or bad sermon, but whether God uses it. Is the blessing of God on it? Here God blessed tremendously as three thousand people responded to the gospel (Acts 2:41).

Then follows one of the most interesting statements in Scripture. "They [the converts] devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42).

What makes this passage so fascinating is what is *not* recorded. What happened between verses 41 and 42? How did the apostles go about getting all those people together in a devoted fellowship? Have you ever tried to have a meeting for new converts after an evangelistic thrust or a special

meeting? How many of them showed up? Usually not too many. But the apostles, having been trained by Jesus, were able to do it.

The Ministry of Follow-up

Here were the apostles with three thousand converts on their hands. What were most of these people planning to do? Probably what they had always done—enjoy the feast and go home, scattering to the four winds. But the apostles had other plans.

What was their commission? Get converts? No. Their commission (and ours) was to *make disciples* (Matt. 28:19). Jesus had been clear about that, and these men had heard Him talk about discipleship many times. They knew His standards and what He expected from His followers.

The standards of Jesus.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15:7-8).

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32).

A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26-27).

In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:33).

The plan of Jesus. So what were the apostles to do with the converts? Just stand there while these three thousand new believers casually walked out of town? Hardly.

On another occasion after the resurrection Jesus had asked Peter some rather piercing questions.

When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?"

"Yes, Lord," he said, "you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my lambs."

Again Jesus said, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me?"

He answered, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Take care of my sheep."

The third time he said to him, "Simón, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you."

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

What Jesus told Peter primarily was to feed the lambs and the sheep. So here were three thousand lambs, newly born into the kingdom of God. And Jesus' mandate was that they must be fed and they must be discipled.

The activities of the apostles. In order to provide food and housing for those who needed to be fed and discipled, those who originally had no intention of staying in Jerusalem for any length of time, the apostles took some emergency measures. These would enable the new believers to stay and receive the follow-up training and help they would need.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:44-47).

During the next series of accounts in the Book of Acts, these new converts are not very visible. But they must have been just like young children in a family, watching everything, hearing everything, and soon to imitate everything. Their numbers began to grow; at one time five thousand men were added (Acts 4:4). Later, additional multitudes were reached (Acts 5:14).

Examples to the new believers. As thousands were being

swept into the kingdom, what was going on in the lives of the new converts? They were watching as the apostles were beaten, threatened, and hauled off to jail for their testimony for Christ (Acts 4:17; 5:18,40). They observed as the apostles preached the gospel at every opportunity (Acts 3:14-15; 4:10,33; 5:30-31).

They were there as the apostles responded with joy to the persecution they were forced to endure. "So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name" (Acts 5:41, NASB). And they listened carefully as the apostles diligently taught them the things of the Lord. "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

What effect did this have on the lives of these growing disciples? What lessons were they learning? The answers become obvious as we see them become functioning disciples and workers in the body of Christ. The training they received from the apostles sank in. They were like tape recorders with the recording mechanism turned on. Soon they would begin to play it back to the world.

The hour of testing. Then came the hour in which they were tested. After the death of Stephen, a tremendous persecution came against the believers. "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (Acts 8:1).

It is interesting to note that this event is the next step in the fulfillment of the commission given earlier (Acts 1:8). Notice that all were dispersed except the apostles. Why weren't they scattered? Because they had been granted religious asylum by Gamaliel, who had declared, "Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God" (Acts 5:38-39).

The religious leaders had agreed to this, but there was no protection for the ordinary believers. So they fled, but not in a panic. "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went

everywhere preaching the Word" (Acts 8:4, KJV).

Why did they do that? Why did they go everywhere preaching the Word? Because they had been raised in an atmosphere of witnessing. They assumed that it was the normal thing to do. It was all they knew of Christianity. They had been taught it and had been given examples.

As we think of our ministry of making disciples today, we need to take this point seriously. If we want to see a certain performance or certain attitude develop in those with whom we are working, we must remember the tremendous power of the personal example. These new Christians were merely following the example of their leaders.

The ministry of Philip. The Spirit of God then directs our attention to one of these men, a deacon. "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there" (Acts 8:5). We see him preaching the name of Christ in the area, resulting in "great joy in that city" (Acts 8:8).

Later, we see him witnessing to the man in the chariot. "Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). Again, it was what had been shown him and taught him that made him an effective witness. His training had prepared him for this responsibility.

Others' ministries. Some of those people who had been in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost were from Cyrene (Acts 2:10). Some of them had responded to the gospel and had received discipleship training from the apostles. After they were scattered by the persecution, they reappear again.

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord (Acts 11:19-21).

We see them, too, out preaching the Lord Jesus. Their testimony was powerful, as the hand of the Lord was on their lives. Their message was simple; they preached the Lord Jesus. And many believed.

The continued interest of the apostles. One other thing

needs to be noted in the training of these growing disciples. When they left the apostles, they were not forgotten. The apostles followed them with their prayers and with their concern.

News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord (Acts 11:22-24).

A great principle of training emerges here. These people were out of sight, but not out of mind. When it became evident that they needed help in their ministry, they received it.

Summary and application. As we have reviewed the apostles' ministry after the ascension of Jesus and the subsequent ministry of those disciples whom they trained, we see so much that is applicable to our own lives and ministries. Pastors have asked me, "But do you think this discipleship training can work in the church today?"

My answer has always been the same: It worked in the church in Jerusalem; it worked in the church in Antioch. This whole approach got its start in the New Testament church. It grew and flourished in these churches. *And there is no reason on earth why it cannot be applied today.*

The Great Commission remains the same. The message of the gospel is the same. We minister through the power of the same Holy Spirit. We have the same Word of God. And we have the promise Jesus made after the command to make disciples, "And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

What then is the problem today? Why don't we see more of this going on? Why are fruitful, dedicated, mature disciples so rare? The biggest reason is that all too often we have relied on programs or materials or some other thing to do the job.

The ministry is to be carried on by people, not programs. It is to be carried out by *someone* and not by some *thing*. Disciples cannot be mass produced. We cannot drop people into a "program" and see disciples emerge at the end of the production line. It takes time to make disciples. It takes indi-

vidual, personal attention. It takes hours of prayer for them. It takes patience and understanding to teach them how to get into the Word of God for themselves, how to feed and nourish their souls, and by the power of the Holy Spirit how to apply the word to their lives. And it takes being an example to them of all of the above.

The Example of the Apostle Paul

This ministry of making disciples takes time and effort, but the results are lasting. The apostle Paul is an example of what it takes and what the cost of this kind of ministry is.

He had just been on a missionary journey and God had abundantly blessed his efforts. Many had been brought to the Lord. Thousands had heard the gospel. The mission had almost cost him his life. But on that trip, after he had been stoned and left for dead on one occasion, he returned to the very places where the hostility had been the greatest, "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith" (Acts 14:22).

He returned to Antioch, and some time passed. Paul became burdened for these people and said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the Word of the Lord, and see how they are doing" (Acts 15:36). We often refer to this journey as Paul's second mission. Actually this was the beginning of his first *discipling* journey. "He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41).

After the long and arduous trip, he returned again to Antioch. The Spirit of God moved in his heart once more, and he went out again on another mission. "After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). Yes, it took time and effort, but the apostle Paul was a true maker of disciples.

In a later letter, Paul spells out this aspect of his ministry. Speaking of Jesus he said:

So, naturally, we proclaim Christ! We warn everyone we meet, and we teach everyone we can, all that we know about Him, so that, if possible, we may bring every man up to his full maturity in Jesus Christ. This is what I

am working at all the time, with all the strength that God gives me (Col. 1:28-29, *Phillips*).

Note that carefully. He *worked* at it all the time, with all the strength God gave him. What did he do? He won people to Christ and brought them to their full maturity in Him. The process was costly and time consuming. On one occasion he stated to those who would carry on the ministry, "So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31).

He had carried on the same kind of ministry among the Thessalonians.

For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (1 Thess. 2:11-12).

We have looked briefly at the ministry of the apostles whom Jesus had chosen to carry on His work. Their ministry was set in the context of prisons, beatings, threatenings, earthquakes, shipwrecks, plots to murder, miracles, and many other events up and down the roads and seas of the Mediterranean world.

The devil tried his best to stop them, but they got the job done. They stuck with it. Their commission had been clear: "Therefore go and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19). And they did. They proved to be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work the Lord had sent them to do.

