

# Adapting Biblical Disciple-Making Evangelism Amidst Cultural Impediments

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the early church adapted biblical disciple-making evangelism within its context. Exegeting key passages such as Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 2:42-47, Acts 20:20, 2 Timothy 2:2, 1 Corinthians 2:2, 4, and Acts 17, it defines the scope of disciple-making as it relates to evangelism. The research examines the impact of cultural impediments on the church's evangelistic efforts, focusing on strategies to improve soul winning and grow converted believers toward maturity in Christ. Based on documentary analysis, the study draws on narratives, Bible commentaries, and Ellen White writings as primary sources. It recommends that the church encourage members to both nurture existing believers toward maturity and actively lead unbelievers to Christ for salvation.

## INTRODUCTIONS

The command "Go therefore and make disciples ... (Matthew 28:19-20)" was given to the eleven disciples, representing the entire church. The main verb in this commission is "make disciples," with the other verbs "go," "teaching," and "baptizing" describing the church's actions in the disciple-making process. Thus, the mission of the church is making disciples. As the church makes disciples, it goes from place to place, teaching and baptizing. These three verbs are means to an end, not ends in themselves. In this paper, evangelism refers to leading people to Christ, while disciple-making encompasses the entire process of leading people to Christ for salvation, nurturing them toward maturity in Christ, and commissioning them for service after equipping them. Evangelism is a component of discipleship. This integrated process is termed disciple-making evangelism.

According to Hull (2007), "Only one road leads to world evangelism: disciple making" (p. 19). He further observes that "the church has tried to get world evangelization without disciple making" (p. 19). This is a result of pastors attempting to get quick results and such short cuts have proved to be futile. Such methods of soul winning have been a result of misconceptions of the real nature of what disciple making means.

## Definition of Disciple Making Evangelism

Ogden, G. (2018) defines disciple-making as "an intentional relationship in which we walk alongside other disciples in order to encourage, equip and challenge one another in love to grow toward maturity in Christ." This definition highlights disciple-making as a personal process within a relational context, where encouragement and loving support are optimally rendered in an intimate setting.

However, the definition lacks clarity on the initiation points of the disciple-making process, potentially implying it begins at conversion and is synonymous with nurturing. This overlooks the evangelism aspect, which involves befriending people to gain confidence and facilitate gospel sharing. The church should not ignore this phase in accomplishing the Great Commission.

A comprehensive definition of disciple-making evangelism should encompass four phases:

Building relations for Christ, leading people to Christ for salvation, growing them to maturity, and sending them to work for Christ after equipping them for saving others.

This definition is in harmony with Bill Hull and Bobby Harrington's (2019) understanding of disciple-making. They see it as comprising leading souls to Christ for salvation (evangelism) and also leading souls towards maturity in Christ (nurturing). Some in the church seem to have separated evangelism from discipleship. They appear to place more emphasis on evangelism which produces church members instead of disciples. While some see discipleship as a process that begins at conversion, Bill Hull and Bobby Harrington argue that it starts before one accepts salvation. They refer to what they call the pre-conversion and post-conversion discipleship. Normally the pre-conversion phase comprises meeting the needs of a prospects in order to build relations with them and then share Christ to them leading to their acceptance of salvation or conversion. This pre-conversion phase prior to their initial decision to follow Christ (what many call conversion), refers to all of the meaningful contacts with those seeking God that intend to lead them to conversion.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual states that disciple-making commences the moment an individual responds to Christ's invitation, taking their first steps towards Him (p. 47). Notably, this occurs prior to a public confession of conversion to the church. Consequently, it can be inferred that the journey of making disciples begins when an individual makes an initial positive response, drawing towards Christ. This notion is supported by the Church Manual's reference to John 1:35-2:2, showing Jesus' encounter with the first disciples, illustrating the pre-conversion phase.

On the other hand, the post-conversion phase refers to activities intended to lead converts to maturity in Christ. The above mentioned definition of biblical disciple-making evangelism encompasses both the evangelistic aspect of leading individuals to Christ and the nurturing process of guiding them towards maturity in Christ. Notably, disciples who have matured in Christ are evidently replicating their lives in others. This leads to natural progression towards multiplication.

Notably, in some ecclesiastical circles some have seen evangelism and discipleship as two separate entities. Such a separation has resulted in an overemphasis on evangelism which has merely produced church members not fully committed disciples. Hull and Harrington advocate for an integrated approach which emphasizes that biblical disciple-making begins prior to conversion and extends beyond. It must be noted that the pre-conversion phase involves establishing meaningful connections with prospects, addressing their needs, and sharing Christ in a relational context, ultimately leading them conversion. This phase encompasses all interactions that intentionally guides one towards conversion. The post-conversion phase focuses on all activities that lead the believer towards maturity in Christ.

This wholistic paradigm integrates evangelism, growth towards maturity in Christ hence producing disciples who are empowered to replicate the process. This whole process can be termed disciple-making evangelism. This perspective aligns with Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20, where He instructs His followers to "Go and make disciples..." This command is not limited to nurturing existing believers or just evangelizing non-Christians. It's a comprehensive mandate to be involved in the entire journey – leading people to Christ for salvation and guiding them towards maturity in their faith and finally sending them to work for Christ after equipping them. In essence, Jesus commissioned His disciples to be part of the whole process, from conversion to spiritual growth.

Notably, the command of Jesus in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) was not directed solely at nurturing existing believers, but rather it encompassed the entirety of the disciple-making process. Although addressed specifically to His immediate disciples, the commission's scope extends to the universal church across all generations. If the directive of Jesus was intended exclusively for the nurturing of already converted individuals, it would raise questions about who would be responsible for leading others to conversion. The responsibility of the church encompasses both leading souls to Christ for salvation and growing them towards maturity in Christ.

### **What Led to a Separation of Evangelism from Discipleship**

The separation of evangelism from discipleship is a relatively recent development in Christian history, primarily emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In early Christianity, evangelism and discipleship were intertwined (Acts 2:42-47). The focus was on making disciples, which included sharing the gospel and nurturing believers. During Missionary movements as Christianity spread globally, there developed a pressure to "win

souls" quickly, often prioritizing conversion over long-term discipleship. Missionaries would want to win souls. There were also crusades like the Billy Graham's crusades of the 20th century. It must be noted that these crusades emphasized immediate conversions, sometimes at the expense of follow-up discipleship.

There was also the rise of professionalized ministry which separated "evangelists" from "pastors/teachers." It must also be noted that current churches also seem to have adopted a business-like model of doing ministry that emphasizes "results" (conversions) over process (discipleship). A pastor who has high baptism is deemed to be successful. The fact that in some denominations a pastor is given a goal of the number of people to be baptized with a certain period of time forces them to work towards the result and concentrate less on the whole process. Disciple-making should be a process that is not hurried.

Peter Wagner focused on identifying and defining spiritual gifts and how they can be utilized in evangelism and church growth. His emphasis probably shifted the focus towards evangelism and church growth at the expense of discipleship. Those who are gifted in evangelism would naturally concentrate on moving from place-to-place preaching to win souls, whereas those with gifts that edify and nurture believers concentrate on these "indoor" gifts. It is necessary for the local church leadership to coordinate these gifts so that they work together towards a complete paradigm of ensuring the church leads people to Christ, leads them to growth in Christ, and finally sends them to work for Christ after equipping them for service, which is complete biblical disciple-making. Chan, F. (2020) argues that disciple-making is a community effort, where believers use their gifts and talents to help others grow in their faith. While the temptation is for individuals to concentrate on areas of their giftedness, it is the responsibility of local church leadership to coordinate different gifts and direct them towards disciple-making evangelism.

Ed Stetzer, Director of the Billy Graham Center for Evangelism, notes that Billy Graham's methods, including his crusades, have been influential in global emphasis on evangelism over nurturing. He also acknowledges that the approach may prioritize conversion over long-term discipleship. In his view, Graham's focus on evangelism has been both a strength and a point of critique.

Churches must balance evangelism with discipleship, as mass crusades alone are insufficient for fulfilling the Great Commission. Billy Graham acknowledged this limitation, stating, "Mass crusades... will never finish the Great Commission; but a one-by-one ministry will" (Graham, 1978). Empirical evidence suggests a decline in conversions from large evangelistic campaigns, a trend observed globally and within specific contexts in the current churches. Therefore, public evangelism should be seen as a component of one whole process that begins before conversion and proceeds beyond.

### **A Biblical Support for a Balancing Evangelism and Discipleship**

Evangelism, as already noted is a component of the discipleship journey. Acts 20:20 has been cited as a biblical basis for conducting crusades, where Paul says, "I taught you in public and from house to house." This has led to a model of outreach involving public evangelistic campaigns paired with follow-up Bible studies in homes. Paul's approach was therefore public proclamation of the gospel in synagogues, marketplaces, and lecture halls followed by personal, in-depth teaching in homes. This pattern aligns with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20), where Jesus commands disciples to "make disciples" and "teach them to obey everything I commanded." As noted by D.A. Carson and Crossway (2024), Paul's public preaching was intentionally complemented by private instruction, emphasizing the importance of both evangelism and discipleship."

### **Christ's Model**

Jesus prioritized personal discipleship, emphasizing "being with Jesus" (Mark 3:14) over impersonal dealings. He invested in the lives of the Twelve, modelling a life of obedience and devotion. This one-on-one or small-group discipleship allows mentors to embody Christianity, guiding mentees toward maturity in Christ. Greg Ogden defines discipleship as "a relationship where we intentionally walk alongside a growing disciple... to encourage, correct, and challenge them in love to grow toward maturity in Christ" (Ogden, n.d.).

The use of technology is not a modern phenomenon. In Bible times, letters were also used as a means of communication in the process of disciple-making. In 3 John 1:13, the apostle John writes, "I had many things to write unto you, but I will not with ink and pen write unto you" (KJV). Here, "pen and ink" refer to the common writing technology of the day, equivalent to saying "paper and pen" or "computer and keyboard" today. John's statement suggests he prefers a more personal, face-to-face interaction with the recipient, rather than relying solely on written communication. Technology should supplement, not replace, face-to-face relationships, which are essential for building trust, providing emotional and spiritual support, and modelling Christ-like character (Mark 3:14). Disciple-making involves imparting information, skills, and character, requiring both personal contact and training.

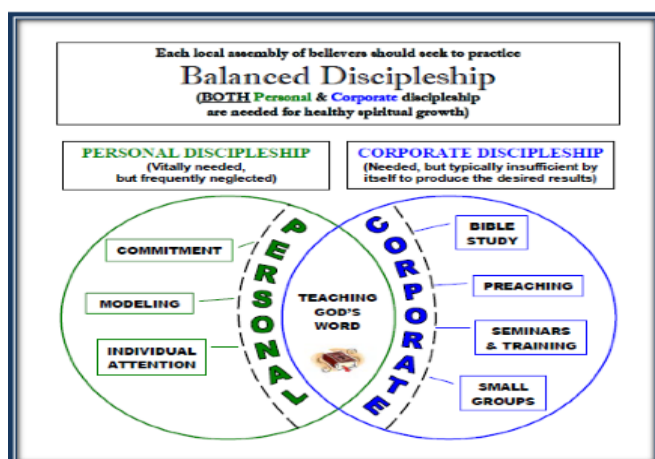
Jesus isolated his disciples to impart special lessons, as seen in the Great Confession (Matthew 16:13-28), the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13), the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42), and the Mount of Olives (Mark 13:3-37, Luke 21:5-36). William Barclay notes, "Jesus knew that there were certain things which the disciples must learn, and which they could only learn in the intimacy of a situation like this" (Barclay, 1975, p. 213). The disciples could learn what Jesus taught because lessons were given in an intimate relational context. Quashie J. A.(2020) has rightly said that teaching is the means by which the principles of God's Word are built into people's lives. In his teaching Jesus could help his disciples internalise the word by living what he taught and relating closely with the disciples. What Jesus taught the disciple would become "flesh." His ministry was incarnational.

These instances show Jesus intentionally isolating his disciples to teach, pray, and prepare them for his departure. They learned about his Kingdom, mission, and vision, especially at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus disclosed that He was a suffering Messiah who would die, helping them understand the nature of His kingdom and the cost of discipleship. Jesus taught that following him is a commitment that could lead to rejection and death. A disciple should deny himself, take his cross, and follow Him. At the heart of following Jesus is Jesus's call to imitate him and replicate him. As disciples, we are called to imitate Jesus's love (John 13:34), his suffering, and his mission (Matt. 4:19).

Christian leaders cannot disciple every believer, but they can minister to crowds and choose a small group to disciple personally. They would ensure those disciplined replicate the process through multiplication (2 Timothy 2:2). This has led some churches to implement spiritual parenting programs, pairing mature believers with new converts. These mature believers serve to model Christianity to new converts and unchurched people as they pray, study the Bible and spend quality time with them. Ogden, G. (2018) has rightly said, "Spiritual disciplines are the habits that form us, shape us, and transform us into the image of Christ. As we practice these disciplines, we become more like Jesus and are empowered to multiply ourselves in others." (Ogden, 2003, p. 126) As already note if spiritual disciplines are practice the enhance growth towards maturity in Christ. A deep and growing relationship will naturally generate a desire to work for the salvation of others.

In the table below Mark Richard Brown has referred to what he calls a balanced discipleship which encompasses both personal and corporate discipleship.

### Balanced Discipleship by Mark Richard Brown (2012)



## Corporate Discipleship

Corporate discipleship, wherein churches disciple members through organized programs, enables the church to minister the gospel to many people and utilizes the various spiritual gifts within the congregation. However, this approach has the disadvantage of being impersonal and shallow, making evangelism event-like, which tempers with the transformative processes of a personal discipleship. Consequently, participants in corporate discipleship may acquire head knowledge without experiencing genuine spiritual growth.

It is essential to recognize that this relational walk begins before conversion, not just after. Building relationships with prospects, meeting their needs, and establishing trust creates a foundation for sharing the message of salvation.

A surface reading of Ogden's definition might imply that discipleship begins after conversion, but a closer examination reveals that relational discipleship is a pre-conversion process that lays the groundwork for conversion and spiritual growth.

## Paul's Model of Discipleship

Like Jesus Paul would minister in public but he identified some individuals he disciplined like Timothy, Silas, Luke and John Mark. He would have a close association with these individuals. Paul gives an additional aspect of disciple making in which he states that what he had entrusted to Timothy was to be committed to faithful men who would in turn also teach others. The Greek word for "entrust" in 2 Timothy 2:2 is "parathēmi" which means "to entrust, commit, or deposit". In this context, Paul is urging Timothy to entrust the teachings of the gospel to faithful people who will pass them on to others. The fact that Paul uses the word "hear" implies that what is entrusted is teachings of the gospel. Entrusting implies more than teaching. The SDA Bible commentary explains that "committing or entrusting to faithful men is also "preparing able young men to assume the leadership of the church when the older generation passes away." This process involves more than just teaching; it requires preparing younger workers. This verse highlights the importance of multiplication in discipleship, where Paul disciplined Timothy, who would then disciple others, creating a chain of discipleship."

## Engaging With Cultural Impediment in Presenting the Gospel

The notion that postmodernism is a recent phenomenon is countered by the fact that biblical writers grappled with similar precedents in their own contexts. The biblical emphasis on contextualization offers valuable insights for Christians seeking to share the gospel in culturally relevant ways. A prime example is Paul's address at Mars Hill in Athens, where he referenced the altar dedicated to the "unknown god" (Acts 17:23). By proceeding from the known to the unknown, Paul demonstrated that the God he preached was not a new deity, but the one the Athenians were already worshiping unknowingly.

Furthermore, Paul emphasized the importance of cultural relevance when he cited one of their poets, saying, "...in him we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). This approach allowed him to engage with the culture and address questions and concerns, illustrating the value of contextualization in sharing the gospel. By embracing cultural relevance, Christians can effectively communicate the timeless truth of the gospel within current philosophical contexts, conveying the message in a way that resonates with the target audience.

## Challenging Precedents of Postmodern Relativism

The biblical account of God's dealings with humanity presents a counterpoint to postmodernism's rejection of absolute truth. In Acts 17:30, Paul notes that God "overlooked times of ignorance," implying that God's patience does not validate ignorance or sin. Instead, God's command to repent suggests the existence of a standard of truth. Paul's argument directly challenges relativism, which insists that all beliefs are equal or that there is no absolute truth. Alex R. Jaramillo (2023) argues that postmodernism's relativistic worldview is self-defeating, failing to provide a coherent basis for reality, morality, or justice. He further argues that the Christian worldview affirms the existence of a personal God who is the source of objective truth and moral order.

## **Effective Evangelism in a Postmodern Context**

Evangelism involves more than just presenting logical arguments for absolute truth. According to Ellen White, the gospel should be shared as a living force that transforms lives, rather than a dry theory. This approach resonates with postmodern audiences. Paul's emphasis on preaching "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Corinthians 2:2, 4) suggests that he prioritized authentic, Spirit-empowered communication.

Stanley Grenz argues that evangelism should focus on sharing personal experiences of faith, highlighting the importance of relationships and authenticity. Effective evangelism involves proclaiming the message through both words and actions, demonstrating the transformative power of Christianity. By sharing personal testimonies and living out their faith, Christians can build bridges with postmodern individuals and effectively share the gospel.

This approach recognizes that people are more likely to be drawn to a faith that is lived out in authentic, meaningful relationships, rather than simply being presented with abstract truths. By combining words and actions, Christians can create opportunities for genuine connections and spiritual growth.

## **How the Bible Counteracted Post-Modernism Precedents**

The Bible, though not written specifically to address postmodernism, contains principles that equip disciples to minister effectively in postmodern contexts. Paul's engagement with Greek philosophers in Acts 17, particularly at the Areopagus, illustrates this. As he debated with philosophers, Paul initially relied on philosophical reasoning, "matching logic with logic, philosophy with philosophy, eloquence with eloquence" (White, n.d., p. 236). However, he soon discovered that this approach yielded little success. Instead, he emphasized the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching "not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Corinthians 2:2, 4).

This shift in approach highlights a crucial principle: it is not human reason or logic alone that transforms hearts, but the power of the Holy Spirit. In a postmodern context, where truth is often relativized and reason is distrusted, this emphasis on spiritual power is particularly relevant. By relying on the Holy Spirit, disciples can transcend the limitations of human wisdom and effectively proclaim the gospel.

## **The Interplay of Conduct and Proclamation in Christian Witness**

Peter's exhortation to his audience emphasizes the importance of living out their Christian faith in a manner that prompts unbelievers to inquire about the hope that underlies their lives (1 Peter 3:15). This highlights the significance of a holy life preceding verbal proclamation, as it creates a context in which the message of Christianity is more likely to be received. The lived example of a Christian life serves as a powerful attractant, drawing unbelievers and empowering them to grow towards Christian maturity as they observe and experience the faith in action. Both the demonstration of a holy life and verbal proclamation are integral components of the disciple-making process, working together to facilitate spiritual growth and transformation.

## **Research Questions**

1. What is biblical disciple-making evangelism?
2. How did the New Testament church seek to balance evangelism and disciple-making in their mission strategies?
3. What are the observable diversions from biblical disciple-making Evangelism today?
4. What cultural challenges did the Bible writers grapple with as they sought to implement biblical Disciple-making Evangelism?

## Findings

The study reveals key aspects of disciple-making evangelism as commissioned by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20:

1. Disciple-making evangelism encompasses both leading people to Christ for salvation and growing them toward maturity in Christ, enabling them to multiply themselves in others. Evangelism should not be separated from disciple-making.
2. Both Jesus and the apostle Paul modeled relational discipleship, imparting theoretical knowledge, skills, and character to those they discipled.
3. In applying this approach, cultural relevance is crucial, as seen in Paul's encounter with post-modernism precedents in Athens. Although post-modernism is often seen as a modern phenomenon, Paul's encounter with it in Athens shows it has precedents.
4. This philosophy rejects absolute truth; however, Paul's reference to the judgment in Athens underscores the necessity of absolute truth, pointing to God as the source of objective truth and moral order.
5. Paul embraced cultural relevance when he referred to the Greek poet (Acts 17:28), who was familiar to his audience. Furthermore, he emphasized that by relying on the Holy Spirit, disciples can transcend the limitations of human wisdom and effectively proclaim the gospel.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations will be in line with the four phases of Biblical Disciple-Making Evangelism:

1. The church should encourage its members not only to nurture the spiritual growth of existing believers toward maturity, but also to actively lead unbelievers to Christ for salvation.
2. In presenting the message of the Bible, the disciple-maker should embrace cultural relevance and counteract prevailing philosophies by underscoring the necessity of absolute truth, thereby pointing to God as the ultimate source of objective truth and moral order.
3. The church should employ Christ's method to draw unbelievers to Christ for salvation.
4. Church leaders are encouraged to pair new members with mature ones, facilitating growth within an intimate relational context through incarnational teaching.
5. The disciple-makers are to model disciple-making to their disciples, who will in turn replicate the process.

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