
5

Christ's Perspective on Christian Ministry

A diligent farmer is concerned about his crops' root system the way a believer is concerned about the root systems of his ministry. Just as productive crops demand strong, healthy roots, even so growing and maturing believers are rooted in the soul of agape—branching off into a love for the Lord, a love for other believers, and a love for unbelievers, wherever needs are seen that can be met.

The Moore family is seeing these principles being worked out in exciting ways in their community. In addition to the joy of sharing their lives with the students and faculty-staff family at Multnomah School of the Bible, they are surrounded with ministry opportunities at home and in their semi-rural church body. Yet, beyond responsibilities to each other as a family unit at home, to the school, and to the local assembly, they are excited about their growing ministry with their neighbors.

They have lived at the present location in the wooded foothills of Mt. Hood near Portland since 1977. The Lord provided them with a home and some acreage to practice the family art of “gentleman farming.” When they moved in, they began cultivating a friendship with their nearest neighbors. They are a family of eight—joined by

A New Testament Blueprint for the Church

assorted goats, horses, and barn critters. As a family, the Moores began to express their concern and love for their neighbors in the creative and energetic ways they could imagine. They have prayed for them regularly. As needs developed, they were available as time and skills allowed. The relationship with them, and love for them, has grown steadily during these years. Presently, though the parents have made no known commitment to Christ, the Moores can honestly say that they, as a family, genuinely love that family. They understand that the friendship with them is not conditional. They do not need to act a certain way, or speak a certain way, or believe the same way, in order to maintain a friendship. They consider this family their special friends and are trusting that they, as a family, will soon come to faith in Christ Jesus. “Loving my neighbor as myself” involves extending ourselves beyond our Christian comfort zones into lives and relationships that allow the “loving the Lord my God” to be demonstrated in practical ways.

We’ve given you this background on the ministry commitments of John’s family on purpose. We think the ministry emphasis of Matthew 22:34-40 forms an important backdrop to the concerns and instructions of Christ to the eleven after His resurrection. This instruction is seen in Matthew 28:16-20 and is referred to as the Great Commission.

DISCIPLE-MAKING AND THE CHURCH

Public relations. Proclaiming the message through media. Worldwide enterprise. Sound familiar? Such is the stuff Christian method and ministry is made of today. Without making final judgment on the aforementioned emphases, it nevertheless is instructive to note that the initial patterns for ministry by the Lord were distinctively different from methods we might naturally think of.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they

Christ's Perspective on Christian Ministry

worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:16-20).

Some strategy! Christ was regathering the eleven. Just before that meeting the disciples were fearful and discouraged, confused and overwhelmed by the turn of events in Jerusalem. The prophecy of Zechariah concerning the striking of the shepherd and scattering of the sheep had been fulfilled. Now in further fulfillment of the events following His resurrection, Christ was meeting His disciples in the familiar setting of Galilee (Matt. 26:32; cf. Zech.13:7). That was where Christ and the disciples had begun almost four years earlier (Matt. 4:12-22). For nearly a year those men had stayed with Christ, learning of Him. The next two years were spent in the Galilean region, followed by their taking the gospel message into Judea and Perea in the last six months preceding the final week in Jerusalem. Now they were back home near an unnamed but evidently familiar mountain (28:16). With a mixture of joy and doubt (28:17; cf. 28:8) they greeted Jesus.

The risen (not yet ascended) Lord had accomplished His work of atonement on the cross. "All authority" in heaven and earth was His. The ministry mandate given in Matthew 28 has two pertinent backdrops from other passages in Matthew that apply to the church. First, in Matthew 16:13-20 heaven and earth had been a similar concern. With great prophetic power and precision Christ had affirmed the confession of Peter concerning His rightful claim as Messiah. Building on that, He predicted just that—a building program. But not with the modern connotation of brick and mortar; rather, Christ meant buildings of flesh and blood. There is a critical difference. Christ predicted that upon Peter and the other apostles

A New Testament Blueprint for the Church

He would build His church. Further, He predicted that there would be a divine-human cooperation in the project, whereby the authority and efforts would be shared. He saw that even the gates of hell would not prevent its advancement. This was the prediction of the New Testament church's beginning in universal form.

A second, less-known reference to the church adds a further perspective. In Matthew 18:17 Christ gives guidelines for admonishment in the Body of Christ—discipline of the sinning brother—within the four-fold steps of 18:15-17. These guidelines are reinforced with key epistolary references (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-5; 9:11; 11:30; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). This was the preview of the existence and partial ministry of the local church meeting together to proclaim Christ, build up the local members, and take the gospel to others who have not heard.

Two references. One citing the majesty of the messianic promises, and the other focusing on the agony of how to deal with a sinning brother. One looking to the whole of the Body of Christ. The other looking to the local expression of the whole. Both form a vital part of the ministry task of the Great Commission.

DISCIPLE-MAKING: THE MANDATE

As we have seen in chapter 4, Christ had already given clear and forceful instruction on the essentials of ministry, based on the greatest commandments of the Old Testament. We are to be lovers of God and lovers of others. Matthew 28:19-20a is a further definition of how that is to be accomplished. Disciple-making is the key verb in this passage. It is the barometer that all ministry tasks are to be measured against in the church. Measurements in “nickels, numbers, and noise,” or other sundry concerns ultimately must be held accountable to this passage. If our efforts are primarily to build into the lives of the saints, then we can be confident we are building on the right ministry foundation.

The ministry is more than many secondary matters associ-

Christ's Perspective on Christian Ministry

ated with modern Christian endeavors—matters that look more at physical rather than human assets. All too often, unfortunately, it is the tail wagging the dog in Christendom. It is the budget, or the construction program, or the Christian school that determines ministry directions. Observe that Christ would have none of that. His concern was people—disciples—and all other competitors for top billing in the ministry were skillfully avoided.

Christ's preoccupation was with a ministry process that transferred truths from the teacher into the lives of the disciples (Luke 6:40). His focus was on quality, not quantity; multiplication, not addition. He selectively chose a few. He kept narrowing the audience of His message to those "who had ears to hear." He often drew Peter, James, and John away from even the twelve for private instruction. His concern was for building only one kingdom—the kingdom of His Father.

Disciples never prosper from production-line treatment. We sometimes look at the church as we would a large herd of steers. Each steer has our membership or denominational brand. But by face or name or individual, they are unknown. Yet we dutifully drive them to plush pastures, assuming all the while that they are developing personally as disciples. Then we wonder why the church is not functioning as a healthy body.

Once a week John meets with a group of men from different churches, sharing a common commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. They eat breakfast together, study the Word together, and write out personal applications of the text, which then are shared for the purpose of prayer and personal follow-up, where appropriate. In ministry terms, that is a highlight to John's week. The regular interaction of men who share a love for the Lord and for one other, and are able to make progress at both levels in the context of gentle accountability, is without equal for growing disciples. Actually, to women in the Body of Christ, this is no surprise. They have been doing it for years. But as men, we have not done well in matters of support and expressed affection. Yet the pattern of Christ's ministry

A New Testament Blueprint for the Church

and the instruction of the epistles (cf. Tit. 2:1-7) clearly speaks to a people-priority above any competing voice.

The emphasis on disciple-making in the Great Commission has three qualifiers: going, baptizing, and teaching. *Going* expresses the overall pattern for disciple-making. We are to be a people who are regularly looking around in relation to the needs of others. This is the beginning of the extension of the “loving your neighbor as yourself” into unknown territory. In matters of Christian ministry, we have settled into the following: “Actually, I’m open to ministry — either at home or overseas. But I think it wise to stay put unless God clearly shows me I should go.” We should submit that that thinking is backward. Rather, we should be saying, “I think it most consistent with the Scriptures that I go — unless God clearly shows me I should stay.” Such an emphasis would fit well with the pattern of Christ and the twelve, who had an urgency for going that carried them into the needs and lives of those around them, and beyond (Matt. 9:13; 10:6-7; 18:12).

But *going* is only the general pattern as presented by Christ in Matthew. The definitive steps of discipleship are the next two: baptizing and teaching.

DISCIPLE-MAKING: THE DIVINE TWO-STEP

A disciple is a student, a learner. Everything about the term and the teaching of Christ shouts, “Process!” It is a process that begins with the hearing of the Word that results in conversion. This conversion places a believer into the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13).

The discipleship process contains two major parts: baptizing and teaching. Baptism as a concept reminds us of John’s baptism and the baptism of Christ (Matt. 3:1-17). John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. It was associated with the need for a changed life. For believers, it was associated with their sins (3:6). For the religious leaders, it focused on fruit (3:8, 10). It was turning away

from an old pattern of life and thinking rightly and anew concerning the kingdom of God and the Messiah.

Christ's baptism was both the same as and different from John's baptism. It was the same in that it signaled something new. It was the initial presentation of Christ. It brought the proclamation of the Father concerning His Son: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (3:17). Yet it was immensely different. In the life of Christ there was no sin or hypocrisy. There needed to be no confession of and turning away from sin. For Christ, His baptism was a word of proclamation, of divine approval. Likewise, baptism for us "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" becomes a proclamation of divine approval.

Baptism and repentance. Baptism and obedience, for the production of fruit. For the disciple, baptism in a public forum becomes the first step in fruit production, the first step in considering seriously the cost of following Christ. Thus, we are not surprised when we read, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8). From the beginning of Christ's ministry, baptism and discipleship have been intimately joined. Baptism, though being de-emphasized in modern ministry circles, remains the vital first way a child of the King understands that his conversion is to result in a changed life, inwardly and outwardly. It is the understanding of the possible "gains" and "losses" in the kingdom of God, while being kept securely in the eternal hands of the Father (John 15:1-8; cf. 10:27-30; 1 Cor. 3:15; 5:5).

Teaching ensures the finishing of the disciple-making process. It is teaching others to live out the truths Christ espoused. Notice that He says, "Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20a). It is Truth wedded to life. The standard for teaching is complete obedience—obedience in everything. The commission, or mandate, in Matthew 28 thus becomes a lifetime project.

Of course Christ personified the master teacher. From the masterful interpretations of the law to the instruction of His disciples

A New Testament Blueprint for the Church

He modeled the truth He taught (Matt. 5:1-7:28; 28:19-20). The term *teaching* appears strategically in Matthew's gospel. It depicts both the message and method of Christ's ministry in contrast to the presentation of the religious leaders.

Christ's message was clearly taught: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom" (Matt. 4:23a). It was the message of the kingdom—the good news that God had acted on behalf of and had sent the Messiah to secure redemption from sin. Even later the enemies of Christ begrudgingly admitted that He taught "the way of God" (Matt. 22:16). It was a message of good news and hope, and it was a message given with authority (Matt. 7:29; 13:54; 21:23). Christ's method was to take the message regularly to the masses, particularly to places of religious inquiry (Matt. 9:35; 11:1; 13:54; 26:55).

But every good plan seems to encounter competing elements. There were competitors in Christ's day—men who equally taught about the ways of God—yet from a bias and twist that was exposed by Christ. The first hint of that is in Matthew 5:19. In speaking of the righteousness of the religious leaders, Christ warned against breaking any of the commandments and against teaching other to do so. In others words, the religious leaders were doing the very opposite of what they espoused. This is precisely brought out by Matthew later in his gospel:

Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men (Matt. 15:6b-9).

Straight talk on a stiff subject. Christ pinpointed the patterns of the Pharisees and scribes. They had so twisted and interpreted the Old Testament laws that they had actually invalidated them. They were nullifying and breaking the greatest commandment, to "love the

Christ's Perspective on Christian Ministry

Lord your God with all your heart . . . soul [and] . . . mind.” Thus, Isaiah’s indictment became Christ’s as well. That was powerful stuff for a proud people.

DISCIPLE-MAKING AND THE FINAL COMFORT

The disciples were about to embark on a mystery voyage. Their lives were soon to encounter what is one of the mysteries of Christ and His Body in our present age. Christ is both with us and absent from us as we wait for His return. Christ ended the Great Commission with words of comfort, “And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20b). Shortly Christ would rendezvous with His disciples again. That time in Jerusalem He would give them final instructions about the spread of the gospel and then be “taken up before their very eyes” (Acts 1:1-9). Worked carefully into the fabric of Christ’s ministry that He was leaving His disciples were threads of comfort—His continuing presence with them. He would never leave them. Until the end of the age as they knew it, He would remain. This is true for us also. All of the effort and commitment and instruction and obedience is accompanied by the presence of Christ Himself. Not just a mystery—a final comfort!

CONCLUSIONS

Loving your Lord and loving your neighbor. This is the whole of the Christian message. Having begun the pilgrimage by hearing the gospel and receiving Christ as Savior, the pilgrim is to continue his journey by encountering and overcoming two basic hurdles.

The first is *baptism*. Initial commitment. The second is the reception of *teaching*, which leads to obedience. Consistency. The indoctrination of the disciple-making process thus has two steps, or hurdles. For the newborn New Testament church, those steps began on the day of Pentecost and continued daily from then on (Acts 2:41-47). For others, the start is much slower. But for all true believers

A New Testament Blueprint for the Church

the race is on. The track is before us. The pace is faithfulness. The goal is increasing fellowship with Christ Himself, accompanied by the valued commendation “Disciple.”