

Andrew David Ruth
Theological Reflection Paper 5
Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church
January 15, 2014

Making Disciples Who Make Disciples – Or Not?

Dawson Trotman, perhaps the best American disciple maker of the 20th Century, was once asked to aid in the selection of individuals for foreign mission service.¹ He interviewed all 29 candidates with the same two questions:

1. “How is your devotional life? How is the time you spend with the Lord? Do you feel that your devotional life is what the Lord would have it be?” If not, “Why is your devotional life not what it should be?”
2. “How many persons do you know by name today who were won to Christ² by you and are living for Him?”

Out of the 29 candidates, only one believed his devotional life “is what it ought to be.” As per the second question, Trotman recounts, “The majority had to admit that they were ready to cross an ocean and learn a foreign language, but that they had not won their first soul who was going on with Christ.” And so he sincerely asked, “How do you expect that by crossing an ocean and speaking in a foreign language with people who are suspicious of you, whose way of life is unfamiliar, you will be able to do there what you have not yet done here?”

As I read the account on a Chicken Bus in Zambia, my own eyes sank as my thoughts drifted to my own answers for those questions.³ Still it was the second question that kicked like a mule. I know of several handfuls of men that are following Jesus because of me, but it has honestly been a dry spell for me – probably 3 years since I personally disciplined someone to faith

¹ Dawson Trotman records this episode in his famous sermon, “Born to Reproduce,” available at http://www.discipleshiplibrary.com/dawson_trotman.php

² For a justification of using the language of “won for Christ” see 1 Cor 9.

³ Personally, my own devotional practices are an ever evolving strategy, which I think is good, but not great. While in Zambia, I made a conscious decision to move from depth to breadth i.e. reading more Scripture a day, and spending less time with particular verses. The strategy has given us enormous benefits, though there are times I miss the intimacy of chewing every single word of a verse thoughtfully, like it was a precious morsel of meat in a diet of dried leaves.

in Jesus, through life in the Kingdom, and onto discipling others. Though some of my disciples are making disciples, I haven't been.⁴

To further cauterize the conviction, Claire and I met countless individuals in Africa and Asia reproducing the faith at staggering rates. Iris Ministries in Mozambique plants hundreds of indigenous churches every year, with a realistic goal of planting a church every 5 kilometers. "Every family reach 10 families in 2013" was the realistic goal of Koinonia Patan Church in Nepal. In India, we met a first generation Christian who has planted 106 house churches in 3 years. An illiterate, Untouchable woman and her network of disciples have baptized 12,000 new believers, most of whom have made other new disciples. Our spiritual heroes, Uncle Victor and Auntie Bindhu have more than 12 generations of "spiritual children."

Every time, we heard these stories, I thought of Dawson Trotman's questions, and my own answers, and then thought my favorite thought, "*So why not?*"

What are the reasons for a Christian faith that does not make disciples? Why don't I disciple others? Is it a problem that so many Christians do not reproduce their faith in either their children or their neighbors? What does this "sterility" indicate?

To address these questions as an individual and as a piece of a larger American Mainline Culture, this brief paper will examine several of the reasons why individuals and congregations would not try to convince non-Christians⁵ of the Truth.⁶ To do so it will explore two common

⁴ I already hear the objections, "But you're a minister, and you have affected countless lives. You can never know how what you have done might have affected someone." I do not disagree, but the unnamable people affected by my life will only increase as I add to my list of namable disciples. Living a life that I hope somehow affects anonymous strangers, but which does no particular, personal discipleship is like continuing to live life normally and hoping to lose weight, without particular, enumerable changes – it might happen, but it is far less likely.

⁵ "Non-Christians" is here used to designate those who would not self-describe themselves as a Christian, a Jesus follower, a disciple of Jesus, etc. Therefore it includes adherents of other faiths, atheists, post-theists, agnostics, and the "spiritual but not religious."

⁶ John 14:6

intellectual rationalizations promoted by those against proselytizing, before turning to two emotional obstacles, which effectively inhibit one from making disciples.

The Intellectual Rationalizations for Abstaining from Evangelism/Discipleship

All Religions are basically the same

This is a common axiom for many adherents of different religions and no religion, as well as the synthetic faith promoted by “spiritual but not religious.” It often appeals to an anecdote about blind men and an elephant⁷ to explain how different sources of faith can be simultaneously contradictory and true; and thus how proselytizing is unnecessary and destructive. Yet for all its sensible allegory, ultimately the aphorism reinforces the “arrogance”, exclusivity, and contradiction it hopes to harmonize, while encouraging intellectual ambivalence. It does so by claiming a more exhaustive understanding of each religion than its own adherents, an understanding that in reality contradicts and supersedes the respective axioms of each faith. Moreover it ultimately claims that the founders and followers of every other worldview are well-intentioned, blind persons, while those who can see the whole elephant have the gnosis that brings sight.

Finally, while followers of this aphorism bemoan attempts by individuals to change others’ religious orientation, this is itself a proselytizing religion, which either pities adherents of other faiths for their ignorance, or liberates them with a super-religious epiphany. So while proponents lambast evangelizing Christians, they preach their own gospel and argue through their own apologetics. Thus, it fundamentally endorses the legitimacy of making disciples.

⁷ For an initial survey of this widespread allegory, which began on the Indian subcontinent, see: Wikipedia contributors, "Blind men and an elephant," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Blind_men_and_an_elephant&oldid=587101260 (accessed January 13, 2014).

*All Religions are unique paths to the same destination*⁸

This philosophy of religions looks at a 2D map of the world, and then imagines *heaven*⁹ as a single point in 3-space. Obviously, you need a distinct route from India to that 3rd *heaven* point and a distinct route from Puerto Rico.

Once again, the philosophy attempts to validate every single religion, but to do so, it ignores their unique goals. While each faith aims at a *telos*, these are not only different, but several of them are mutually antagonistic. It is, for example, impossible to conflate the corporate, corporeal, Christian *resurrection* with individual, ethereal, Buddhist *bodhi*. Therefore, if each faith is allowed to identify its own *telos*, the ends become impossible to amalgamate. So while, the proverb feigns respect for all religions, it must ignore and supplant each religion's particular message, hope, goal, and normative truth claims, with a more true, normative metanarrative. So while the message is announced to preclude evangelism, the announcement is in reality evangelism, and thus implicitly legitimates the process of making disciples from other faiths.

Still there are countless Christians that subscribe to this philosophy, on the basis that Christianity describes the one true *telos* for all humanity, namely recreation and resurrection through Jesus the Christ. All other religions "worship Jesus by another name," and so upon death, they will recognize in substance what they previously recognized in shadow, and if not, then they will still enter the New Creation through Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰ Still, this Christo-centric universalism acknowledges Christ as the most substantial, fundamental, and articulate revelation ever given to humanity. All other revelations are somehow equivocal or inarticulate. Thus the

⁸ While offering some sympathetic resonance to the above ideology, this is actually a distinct thought.

⁹ *Heaven* is here a conflation of all the different goals/salvations of different religions. As such it includes, but is not limited to, *nirvana*, *moksha*, *Bodhi*, *jannah*, *resurrection* and *tian*.

¹⁰ Some portion of Christians throughout the centuries since Christ have held this belief, though it has always remained a peripheral view, more dependent on theological frameworks and speculation than on particular pericopes of Scripture. Personally, I believe this philosophy is neither a persuasive nor a faithful construal of Jesus' teachings specifically and the Bible's teachings generally. It appears to know more about salvation and redemption than the "author and perfecter of our faith."

faith lived and taught by Jesus of Nazareth is normative for all human beings, beneficial for their lives, profitable for their relationships, and expedient for their conscious contact with the “Most High God.” So, though this Christo-centric universalism is oft cited as a reason not to “make disciples of all nations,” in actuality, the theology implicitly defines the loving action towards others as a sharing of this revelation, an invitation to follow, and an equipping for inviting others to live into this deepest, thickest, animating, resurrecting reality.¹¹ A failure to do so is to withhold a life-enhancing, life-giving, even life-saving revelation from those in need of such. Thus, an “all roads lead to Christ” mentality compels disciple making.¹²

The Emotional Roadblocks Effectively Inhibiting Disciple Making

A Fear of Offense

In a world, where the above worldviews dominate postmodern and post-theist culture, an attempt to convince someone of a normative truth claim (other than normative “tolerance”) is often perceived as presumptuous and offensive. Some go as far as to say, attempting to change someone’s mind is unloving, because love accepts unconditionally.¹³ This is further buttressed by privatized individualism, where religion becomes a wholly personal matter. Still, while offense is almost certain, it is not certainly detrimental. Unnecessary offence may be limited through relationship and through cultural etiquette¹⁴, but Jesus of Nazareth has a funny way of offending our sensibilities and rationalizations. Throughout the gospel narratives, he is consistently compassionate and offensive. He responds to invitations and supplications with

¹¹ Christianity can still be normative even if universalism is true, and if normative, then making disciples of Jesus becomes a necessary act of love, while failing to do so might be akin to a doctor refusing to treat a minor infected wound, because, “Well, everyone has to die of something, you’ll just get there first.”

¹² For a more centrally orthodox Christian understanding, this compulsion is even stronger, because the stakes are much greater. A failure to warn and prepare others for the coming judgment is to prepare them for damnation, which is an inherently unloving and even damnable offense (cf. Ezek 33).

¹³ For one (unconvincing) attempt to articulate this idea see: John Shore, “Why Christians Shouldn’t Try to Convert Others,” *John Shore: Christianity without the Inanity* (blog), *Patheos Progressive Christian Portal*, December 11, 2013, accessed January 13, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/johnshore/2013/12/why-jesus-wants-christians-to-stop-evangelizing/>.

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Cor 9:18-23 for a Biblical warrant for such.

compassion and even tears, yet he consistently offends folks with his excessive demands and spiritual critiques. He offends the priests, the scribes, dinner hosts, would be followers, disciples, a governor, and even his own mother and brothers. Jesus' love for actual individuals involves confrontation and transformation. Like Jesus, our witness to his message must always come from a deep place of love and compassion, especially when it offends.¹⁵ While the fear is real, and the offense likely, these are eclipsed by "the love of Christ [which] compels us because we are convinced that one died for all and so all have died."¹⁶ This fear is only great, because our gratefulness is so small.

A Fear of Failure

Even where love meets and overwhelms offense, another visceral fear of failure often prevents well-intentioned Jesus followers from sharing their faith and making disciples. Because offense and even relational strain is anticipated, failure seems likely, and if failure is the result, then the relationship was damaged for no reason – or so the argument goes. All of this is compounded by practical obstacles, which include an ignorance of Bible teaching, a lack of training for engaging folks in Jesus conversations, and a shortage of practice trying to implement disciple making mandates and methods.¹⁷

Together, all of these things make failure seem so imminent. And yet, we often overcome this fear of failure when starting a new hobby, learning a new instrument, beginning a new exercise routine, or even changing careers late in life. Moreover, our enjoyment of any one

¹⁵ It is possible and very common for a "Fear of Offense" to actually be a "Fear of Embarrassment," which stems more from self-consciousness than consideration for others. This happens when I'm more concerned about the other person's view of me than I am with the other person's view of Jesus.

¹⁶ 2 Cor 5:14. We must be aware of whether we are giving the offense or Christ is.

¹⁷ This lack of practical evangelism and disciple making practices, conversation starters, training, and then communal training and accountability is a major cause for the fear of failure. Thus the practicalities of "The How and Why of Making Disciples" (as Dr. David Reed calls them) are of preeminent importance for addressing and alleviating this fear of failure. We must try to make disciples in order to learn how to make disciples. There are countless people with the appropriate training that are still afraid of implementing their training.

of these activities we once feared, then usually drives us to invite others to try the same, training them to do so, and encouraging them to do the same for other folks. So why are we willing to share the “good news” of CrossFit, but unable to open our mouths about the better news of Jesus – when the relative benefits of the latter eclipse the former?

First off, these other activities have the integral strengths of community, accountability, practice, progress, and reward. While we often fail initially, a community of encouragement and training by successful practitioners gives us the strength to try again with the promise of future success. Moreover, these activities have implicit rewards shared beyond the individual, whether fitness, profit, or proficiency. Together these light to overwhelm the fear of failure.

Still, the process of making disciples holds several key advantages over these other processes, because the necessary power, motivation, and efficacy depend more on Jesus than on any other individual. Matthew closes his biography with Jesus’ charge to his followers, “All authority on heaven and earth, has been given unto me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey.”¹⁸ In this charge, Jesus first claims ultimate authority before distributing it to each of his disciples for the task of making more and better disciples. He promises that wherever and whenever they make disciples, he will be with them, “even to the end of the age.”¹⁹ Thus, believers do not do this alone or by their own power, but by the authority and co-operation of Jesus. The Apostle Paul echoes this very commission, when he says, “We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”²⁰ To prove that we are not acting of our own accord, Jesus promised to accompany our proclamation with signs and wonders including healings from sickness,

¹⁸ Matthew 28:18ff.

¹⁹ Matthew 28:20.

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:20

deliverance from demons, and transformed lives.²¹ Businesses, products, hobbies, and exercises promise these same things, yet they lack the efficacy to do so because they are at best pale reflections and at worst counterfeit copies of the recreation available in Jesus the Christ.

So Then What, Now What?

“Go therefore and make disciples.” “The things you learned from me...entrust to faithful individuals that will be able to train others.”²² “Be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”²³ “Go and do likewise.”²⁴ “No disciple is greater than his master, but when the disciple is fully trained, he will be like his master.”²⁵ “

So now it is time to lay aside every hindrance or burden to making disciples, and to start the hard work of learning and practicing the discipline. All spiritual disciplines must be redirected towards this art and this end, because while Jesus assumed our prayers, fasts, and study of scripture, he commanded our love and service to others by making them disciples of Jesus.

²¹ cf. Acts 14:3; Mark 16:15-20

²² 2 Tim 2:2

²³ Acts 1:8

²⁴ Luke 10:37

²⁵ Luke 6:40