

MAKING DISCIPLES

8 Bible studies unpacking Jesus' great commission
for our lives and churches

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Making Disciples

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Introduction

Making disciples of Jesus Christ sounds like a fairly daunting activity.

Do we really want to spend our lives urging those around us to make the most profound life change imaginable—to abandon their chosen idols and to worship Jesus as Lord of all? This doesn't seem like the way to a peaceful, popular existence.

In the supposedly Christianized West, it's now common for Christians to experience abuse simply for living out their convictions and being Christian, let alone inviting others to share our worldview and our beliefs. We are often accused of having a destructive effect on people and society. The mood in our culture is to let everyone choose their own path when it comes to matters of sexuality and gender, ethics, and religious beliefs, even when people make choices that are not for their own good or for the common good. Yet compared to others, what we face is mild. In many parts of the world, Christians are intimidated, locked up or worse for proselytising or even for suggesting that Jesus trumps other religions.

Then there's the sheer busyness of life. So many things—some of them important and legitimate, some of them mere unnecessary distractions—compete for our energy and attention. Even if we wanted to do it, do we really have time to devote to disciple-making?

Making disciples of Jesus sounds like a hard road today, for us individually and for our church¹ communities. We will need very deep, driving, life-shaping convictions to enable us to give ourselves to the task of teaching and persuading people to follow Jesus as Lord.

We should acknowledge that we approach the issue of making disciples from a range of perspectives and with a range of experiences. Maybe we have concluded that this is not something the *ordinary* Christian is called to do, which could be a relief. Maybe you're desperately keen to be involved in the work of making disciples, but you've never been taught how and you don't know where to start. Maybe you've tried, but you didn't see the kind of results you were hoping for. Or maybe your church or ministry has drifted from this disciple-making vision,

¹ While these studies largely presume a 'church' context, and so use that term, the biblical principles we'll explore equally have application to parachurch and other ministry contexts.

replacing it with all kinds of aims and activities that are more palatable to the surrounding culture.

How central should this work of disciple-making be in our daily lives and in our church culture? How do we get there, and what does it look like?

These studies are designed to show that the work of disciple-making is at the very heart of the Bible's vision for the life of God's people, and to help us see what it will look like to be involved in this great work of God. *Making Disciples* will forge the deep biblical convictions that we need to help us shape our lives and churches around disciple-making. It's my prayer that, by the end of these studies, you won't just see the challenges and potential pitfalls around making disciples of Jesus. Rather, I pray that you'll come to see the task of making disciples as a central part of your Christian life, and as both an enormous privilege and an attainable goal.

We'll follow a systematic pattern, unpacking the Bible's teaching on various aspects of this issue. Each study will unpack the meaning and significance of Jesus' 'Great Commission', delivered in Matthew 28:18-20. We will see that this call to make disciples is not just a handy proof text for evangelism and mission, but is resoundingly climactic in God's long-term plan for his world.

Note for leaders: As the leader you will need to plan how to get through each study in the time you have available to your group, including how to handle some of the passages of explanatory text and 'Extra input' sections. For example, will you read all of the text in the group time or just pick out some key sentences and encourage people to read it themselves either before the studies (as preparation) or after the studies (as revision)? Also think through whether you will try to look up all of the Bible passages in a study or just the key ones. Or whether you might instead split into subgroups to look at different passages and then report back to the whole group.

These studies are closely related to *The Vine Project: Shaping your ministry culture around disciple-making* (Matthias Media, 2016). *The Vine Project* is designed to guide ministry leadership teams through five phases of bringing about culture change within their church or other ministry. *Making Disciples* aims to help all church members catch the vision of the Great Commission for their own lives and the whole church.

1. Why make disciples? (Part 1)

Jesus is God's Son and Lord over all

In this first study, we'll be looking at the question: why make disciples?

You might think that the answer to this question is fairly obvious. We could simply quote Matthew 28:19 and say, "Because Jesus told us to". And that's certainly true. With all the authority he possesses as the risen Lord of heaven and earth, Jesus did indeed charge his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations.

You might also respond, "Because we want other people to become Christians". That's also true. At a personal level, if I am a Christian—a disciple of Jesus Christ—I should also want other people to share the benefits and privileges of knowing my Lord.² After all, we are committed to the reality that "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim 2:5-6). Could there be any greater love on earth than to lead someone to become a disciple of Jesus?

Yet despite these obvious answers to our question, many of us would have to confess that making disciples of Jesus plays little part in our regular lives.

At this point we may feel ourselves sliding into guilt, self-justification, or general confusion over all the demands and priorities of life that clamour for our attention. And it's not just personal. As a church community, we are busy with the weekly cycle of programs that take a lot of effort from a lot of people—not to mention that people in our church also need love and care through the challenges of life.

So, why make disciples? How important is this mandate? Is it one more thing to add into our lives? Or is the vision of 'making disciples' actually the way of integrating our lives and ministries around God's ultimate purposes?

² In studies 3 and 4 we will unpack more fully what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.



Getting started

1. If someone said to you "I'm okay with Christians having their own faith; I'd just prefer that they kept it to themselves", how might you respond?



Understanding Jesus' commission

To give ourselves to the task of making disciples, we will need some robust convictions about what God is doing in his world and where disciple-making fits in with his big plan.

In a number of our studies, we will begin by looking closely at the 'Great Commission', where Jesus instructs his disciples to make disciples.

Read Matthew 28:16-20.

2. Take a quick skim over Matthew 26-28. What key events are described in these chapters? Why would these events make the eleven disciples feel the weight or significance of Jesus' commission?
3. What does Jesus say about himself in 28:18?
4. What is the connection between what Jesus says about himself and why his disciples should make more disciples? (Note Jesus' use of the word 'therefore' in verse 19.)

5. The Great Commission is structured around the four-fold repetition of the word 'all': all authority; all nations; all that I have commanded; always (literally 'all the days'). What weight or significance does this repetition give to Jesus' words?

Read Matthew 7:28-29, then take a quick skim over Matthew chapters 8-9.

6. In what ways did Jesus demonstrate his authority? Over what does he show his authority?

Read Matthew 10:40, 11:27 and 21:42-46.

7. What did Jesus claim about his authority and his purpose in coming into the world?

Read Colossians 1:9-20 and Philippians 2:5-11.

8. How does the apostle Paul understand the extent of Christ's authority? According to Paul, how does Christ use his authority?

Implications

9. What are your biggest hesitations in obeying Jesus' commission to make disciples?

10. To what extent do the things we've seen in this study help you overcome any inhibitions you have about this task?

11. Based on what we've learned in this study, why should disciple-making be at the centre of your church's agenda?

12. See how many different ways you can truthfully finish this sentence:

We make disciples because...



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

2. Why make disciples? (Part 2)

God's long-term plan is to redeem a people for his Son

In our first study, we started looking at the question: why make disciples?

The answer: because of the authority of the One giving the commission. Jesus is revealed as the unique Lord of the whole cosmos, the only one able to save through his death and resurrection, the one to whom every person owes ultimate allegiance, the one to whom God has given all authority in heaven and on earth.

In this second study, we will build on the theme of Jesus' unique, universal authority by further exploring this question: what is God's long-term plan for his Son and his world?



Getting started

1. What are your long-term plans? What kind of long-term plans do your friends have?
2. Why might we be tempted to doubt that God has a long-term plan?



God's long-term plan revealed in the Old Testament: Jesus' titles reveal his authority

Jesus announces to the eleven disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Matt 28:18). Through his death and resurrection, God has installed Jesus as the Ruler of the Kingdom that he has been announcing throughout his ministry.

The first disciples were overwhelmed with a mixture of worship and doubt in their hearts as they encountered the risen Christ (Matt 28:16-17). However, it is indisputable that, through these disciples, Jesus generated an incredibly powerful missionary movement—not only across the ancient world, but also throughout the world to this very day.

Why were these fragile disciples ultimately persuaded that the world beyond Israel—the nations—should hear about the events surrounding Jesus and his teaching? Bear in mind that being so persuaded cost them their lives. It was not just that they had witnessed and participated in extraordinary events surrounding Jesus of Nazareth. They came to understand the significance of these events in terms of what God was doing in the world.

Once the disciples understood Jesus' identity, they understood his mission, because Jesus came “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3-4; cf. Rom 16:25-26). God has a plan for the world, and Jesus fulfils that plan.

So who was Jesus, according to the Scriptures? What does Matthew say?

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is identified as the One who fulfils the expectations of three Old Testament figures: the Christ, the Suffering Servant, and the Son of Man.

The Christ, the Son of God

Read Psalm 2 and Matthew 1:1, 3:16-17 and 17:5.

3. What are the clues that Jesus is the Anointed One, God's King of Psalm 2?³

3 The Hebrew word for 'Anointed One' is translated into English as 'Messiah'. The Greek word is translated as 'Christ'.

4. From Psalm 2, how would you summarize the breathtaking vision of Jesus' rule over the nations?

The Suffering Servant

The Suffering Servant is the major figure in Isaiah 40-55. The Servant is the one who will bring salvation to the people of Israel, who are suffering under God's judgement in exile.

Read Isaiah 53:1-12 and Matthew 20:20-28.

5. In what ways does the ministry of the Servant in Isaiah point to what Jesus accomplishes as God's Servant?

Read Isaiah 42:1-4 and 49:6, and Matthew 12:15-21.

6. What blessing does God's servant bring to the Gentiles?

The Son of Man

‘The Son of Man’ is the most common way that Jesus refers to himself in the Gospels. The rule of this King of kings is foretold in the prophecy of Daniel, 500 years before Jesus.

Read Daniel 7:13-14.

7. What authority does God give to the son of man? Why is this surprising (cf. Isa 48:11)?

Read Matthew 25:31-32.

8. What are the clues that Jesus is the Son of Man as promised in Daniel 7? (cf. Matt 28:18)

Read Matthew 20:18 and 20:28.

9. In what way is the Son of Man also the Suffering Servant?

Read Matthew 9:1-8.

10. What can the Son of Man do about sin?

Read Matthew 17:9 and 17:22-23.

11. How does the Son of Man come to his glory?

So what is happening in the presence of the Son of Man on the hillside in Galilee, as recorded in Matthew 28?

The eleven disciples are seeing the fulfilment of Daniel's extraordinary vision. Here is the Man before whom all peoples, from every nation and tongue, will bow. It is on this basis—the unique, supreme and worldwide authority of the risen Son of Man, God's Anointed One and King—that Jesus commissions his disciples to make disciples of all nations. Jesus came as the climax of God's plan to give his Son the nations as his inheritance—a plan that, quite incredibly, was fulfilled through his suffering as God's Servant for the forgiveness of sins.

Obedience to the Great Commission is the means by which this mind-blowing, long-term plan of God has been fulfilled for 2000 years by people like us, jars of clay, who proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor 4:1-7).

God is redeeming a people for his Son

We have seen that God has exalted his Son as the King with authority over all things in heaven and on earth. But what does the Son do with this absolute authority? He does not serve himself but the peoples of the world who, without his help, are dead in sin and subject to God's anger. He does this by emptying himself, taking on the form of a servant, and suffering in our place.

Read the following passages and complete the table. (You may like to break into groups and report back on one passage each.)

What do you learn about...	Ephesians 2:1-7, 5:8	Colossians 1:9-20	Revelation 7:9-17
...the end towards which God is moving everything (including us)?			
...the place of Jesus Christ in God's plans?			
...the condition of humanity/the nations without Christ?			
...the significance of Jesus' death in God's plans?			
...why making disciples is important?			



Extra input—so Fred (or Jane) becomes a disciple...⁴

This present world is in urgent need of deliverance from the darkness of sin, suffering, evil and death; and God is doing just that: he is rescuing a people from every nation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—people who are being transformed to be like Jesus, and who are gathered in celebration around Christ's throne in a new creation where evil and death are no more.

This understanding of God's worldwide and history-wide plan gives us a different perspective on 'disciple-making'. It's like a zoomed-out picture that explains what's really going on.

Think about it for a moment. What do you think is really going on when your unbelieving friend Fred becomes a disciple of Jesus, and joins a church?

According to the world, what is happening is that, for a range of personal and situational reasons, Fred is turning to religion and spirituality to fill certain needs in his life—for meaning, for belonging, for comfort, for certainty, to be the best possible version of himself, and more. The world may or may not see this as a positive development for Fred. But however they evaluate it, it will be in terms of the various ways in which 'faith' helps people improve their lives.

According to some Christians, what is going on is not much different from the world's description, with the exception that the God Fred is turning to really is there, and really will help Fred improve his life. That is, the key outcome of Fred becoming a Christian is a better life for Fred—more meaningful, more upright and loving, more rounded and spiritual, possibly even more successful in helping Fred to become the Fred that he was always meant to be.

According to many other Christians, this focus on Christianity improving our lives now is a bit tawdry and unspiritual. They would say what is really happening is that God is giving Fred something much better and more valuable than any life improvement he might imagine, and that is a new personal relationship with God through Jesus—a relationship that gives him salvation and peace with God now, and entry into heaven when he dies.

Now this last description is getting closer, and is in fact perfectly true. But it needs to go further. When we zoom even further out and look at what is happening to Fred with the benefit of what we have just seen in the Bible, we can say that what is going on is not *just* about Fred, or in fact even *primarily* about him. What is happening, amazingly, remarkably, is that God is continuing to move all of history—in this case the little fragment of human history that is

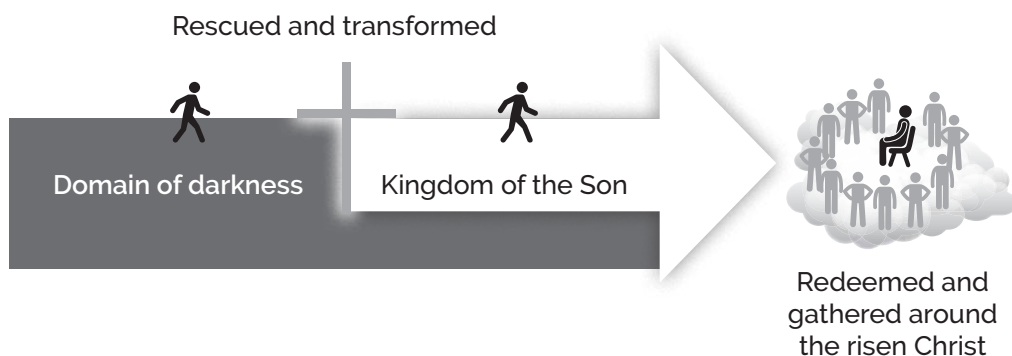
⁴ Taken from *The Vine Project*, pp. 57-59.

Fred—towards its final goal. With the conversion of Fred, God is laying one more brick in an eternal spiritual temple founded on Christ, and glorifying to Christ (1 Pet 2:4-5). Jesus is building his church (Matt 16:18), his congregation, his assembly, his great gathering of redeemed humanity that will one day throng around him in a new heavens and earth—and he is doing it one Fred at a time.

So why make disciples?

Based on everything we've seen in studies 1 and 2, the picture is becoming clearer. We want to make more and more disciples of Jesus Christ *because God's goal for the whole world and the whole of human history is to glorify his beloved Son in the midst of the people he has rescued and transformed.*

We could represent this diagrammatically like this:⁵



Implications

Like all attempts to represent these sorts of ideas visually, we acknowledge that there will be shortcomings and simplifications in our diagram. We will keep adding components to this diagram in the following studies.⁶

12. What do you like about the diagram? How does it help you make sense of God's plan?

⁵ Taken from *The Vine Project*, p. 144.

⁶ We have tried to represent the now/not-yet tension of this present evil age by 'inserting' the kingdom of the Son into the 'domain of darkness'. The domain of darkness still exists, even as people are being transferred out of it into the kingdom of the Son. It will only be finally destroyed on the last day, when the new creation dawns.

13. How would you improve the diagram to more accurately reflect God's plan?

14. Based on what we've seen so far, why do you think many churches lose motivation and urgency for making more disciples of Jesus? How would you describe your own urgency for the task, and that of your church?

15. As a result of this study, are there now any additional ways you can truthfully finish the following sentence?

We make disciples of Jesus because...



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

3. What is a disciple? (Part 1)

Learning that leads to life

In the previous two studies, we thought about the ‘why’ of making disciples. The lordship of Jesus means we have a compelling, God-centred reason to make disciples of Jesus. God has revealed and installed his Son as the King over all and is gathering a redeemed people to belong to him.

In these next two studies, we'll ask: what is a disciple? What does this new way of life look like?



Getting started

1. What mental image comes to mind when you think of the word 'disciple'?
2. What are the positive and negative connotations of being a disciple of someone?



Understanding Jesus' commission

Read Matthew 28:16-20.

3. What does Jesus say about what it means to be a disciple in verse 19?

4. What does Jesus say about what it means to be a disciple in the first part of verse 20?

5. Being a disciple means receiving 'teaching' (v. 20). What makes learning as a disciple much more than an academic process? How does Matthew 28:20 help us understand true Christian learning?



Extra input—the meaning of the word ‘disciple’⁷

From our study of Matthew 28, we see that a disciple is one who is being taught to obey everything that Jesus commanded. A disciple is a *learner*.

And that’s the meaning of the word translated ‘disciple’ in the New Testament (the Greek word *mathētēs*). It basically refers to a learner or student, someone who is apprenticed to a teacher to learn from him.⁸

If a disciple is a learner, then discipleship could be thought of as ‘learnership’, the life-long consequences of learning and obeying Jesus as Lord.

In the case of Jesus’ disciples, the outcome of this learning was not simply the mastery of a certain body of knowledge—what we would today associate with classroom or academic learning. Learning from Jesus was a matter of life and death [of every part of life being conformed to the pattern laid down by the Master]:

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:35)

Learning for salvation

6. Complete the table, answering the questions from each passage (you may like to break into three groups and report back on one passage each).

	Matthew 10:16-39	Mark 8:27-38	Luke 14:25-33
What truths about Jesus do disciples need to learn?			

⁷ Adapted from *The Vine Project*, pp. 64-65.

⁸ This is reflected in the origin of our English word ‘disciple’—the Latin *discere*, ‘to learn’.

What is the life-giving response to Jesus?			
What are the <i>attractive</i> consequences of learning Christ and submitting our lives to him?			
What are the <i>unattractive</i> consequences of learning Christ and submitting our lives to him?			
What is the response to Jesus that leads to death?			

- 7.** In what sense do we 'save' our lives by 'losing' our lives (Mark 8:35; Matt 10:39)?

- 8.** In what way is losing our lives an expression of trust in Jesus?

- 9.** Family relationships and material provision are God's good gifts. Why does Jesus make such extreme statements about family and money (Matt 10:34-37; Luke 14:26)?

- 10.** Why will Jesus be ashamed of those who are ashamed of him and his words (Mark 8:38)?

Implications

11. When someone becomes a disciple of Jesus, what immediate changes would you expect to see in his or her life? What changes might you expect to see over a longer period of time?

12. To follow any other 'master' is to not follow Jesus (cf. Matt 6:24). What masters do people around you follow?

13. Followers of Jesus still struggle with the temptation to follow other masters. Where is your biggest temptation to follow another master, rather than to take up your cross and follow Jesus?



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

For further reflection

You might like to prayerfully consider these questions on your own, or, if you're part of a group and time permits, discuss them as a group.

- When did you become a disciple of Christ by repenting and trusting in him for the forgiveness of your sin? What other allegiances did you need to renounce to become a disciple of Jesus?
- In your context, what does persecution and suffering as a disciple of Jesus look like? In what ways has following Jesus caused tensions in your family relationships? In what ways has following Jesus changed your material lifestyle?
- Is true discipleship fundamentally about martyrdom?⁹

⁹ Interestingly, the word 'martyr' comes from the Greek word for a 'witness'.



Extra input—learning grace and freedom as we take Christ's yoke¹⁰

Denying yourself, taking up your cross and following Jesus could sound like salvation by works—as if deeper commitment secures salvation. So how does Jesus' teaching square with our understanding of salvation by faith and repentance?

Let's think about discipleship as martyrdom, the ultimate decision to lose our life for Jesus and the gospel. Many who have chosen Christ throughout the history of the church have literally given up their life because they owned Christ as their Lord. Being killed for allegiance to Christ's name is not a work that achieves our salvation, but in this fallen world that is hostile to Jesus and his followers, it is sometimes part and parcel of true discipleship.

Losing our life, taking up our cross and following Christ is just another way of talking about repentance and faith. Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin—we cannot have one without the other. Repentance is a kind of death, turning our back on our old ways of worshipping ourselves. As we repent, we throw ourselves upon Christ's mercy for salvation from sin and judgement through his death on the cross (Rom 6:2-9; Gal 2:20). Martyrdom may seem too costly and burdensome, but in reality it is ultimate freedom because, in losing our lives (whether literally or figuratively) for Jesus' sake, we are relying solely on God's grace in Christ.

True discipleship must never become untethered from grace and forgiveness. Following Jesus offers more true freedom than following any other master, or worshipping any other god. No other call allows you to live totally under grace. But it is that same call that tells us we must be willing to abandon everything, including our very lives, for the sake of Jesus and his gospel.

In Matthew 11, Jesus invokes the yoke as a potent symbol of becoming a 'learner'. To 'take the yoke' is a metaphor for service, submission and obedience, for accepting the authority of another—like oxen, who are yoked together to plough in the service of their owner; or slaves, who bear the yoke of their master.

'Taking the yoke' is a way of talking about 'learnership'—the submitting of oneself to learn from and follow the ways of a master or teacher. This is essentially what a 'disciple' was in New Testament times: someone who submitted to the authority of a teacher, in order to learn from him and become like him.

The Pharisees placed heavy burdens on the shoulders of their 'learners' by

¹⁰ Adapted from *The Vine Project*, pp. 68-69.

demanding strict obedience to the law at the expense of doing good and offering mercy (cf. Matt 12:1-12). They were hypocrites, failing to practice what they preached (cf. Matt 23:1-4). But the kind of 'religion' offered by the Pharisees can do nothing to lift the universal burden of human sin.

In contrast, Jesus offers himself to us as one who is "gentle and lowly in heart", the one in whom we can "find rest for [our] souls" (Matt 11:29). To accept Jesus' invitation and to take his yoke upon us is to submit to him completely as our Teacher and our Master. But this yoke is easy and this burden is light because Jesus himself bears the very burden of our sin, offering us free forgiveness and liberation from our sin. Having secured our forgiveness, he now calls on us to submit our lives to him and to learn the pattern of life that he has laid down for us.

4. What is a disciple? (Part 2)

Learning a new way of life

In studies 3 and 4 we are investigating the crucial question: what is a disciple of Jesus?

In our previous study, we saw that a disciple is a ‘learner’ or student, someone who is apprenticed to a teacher to learn from him. And in the case of Jesus as our teacher, we learn the life-giving secrets of the kingdom. Learning Jesus, like no other master, is a matter of life and death.



Extra input—disciples are learners¹¹

Jesus’ first ‘learners’ were receiving life in his kingdom, but also learning a new way of life. The goal was for them not only to know what their teacher knew, but also to be *like* their teacher, to walk in his ways. They weren’t learning a subject; they were learning a *person*, if we can put it like that—his knowledge, his wisdom, his whole way of life. Being a ‘learner’ of Jesus necessarily involves learning truth and content conveyed in words, but it must also involve the learning of a new way of being and living.

The Great Commission itself reminds us of this. The eleven first learners are charged by Jesus to make learners of all peoples, initiating (or baptizing) them into relationship with Father, Son and Spirit, and teaching them to *keep* or *obey* all of Jesus’ commandments.

We often don’t take much notice of that little word ‘keep’. The learners are to be taught not just to *know* the commandments of Jesus. The ‘learning outcome’ is that they *keep* or *observe* or *obey* the commandments of Jesus. They are to learn the new way of life that the Lord Jesus Christ commands his subjects to live, which is summarized and encapsulated in the commandment to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt 22:39)—to give ourselves sacrificially for the benefit of others, as Christ has done for us.

¹¹ Taken from *The Vine Project*, pp. 64, 70–72.

In fact, whereas we often think of learning in terms of our own personal growth and advancement—of becoming a better me in some way—to learn Christ is to be increasingly focused on others rather than ourselves. It is to lay down our lives for others, as Christ laid down his life for us, in weakness and suffering and death.

This is what a ‘learner’ of Jesus is learning: a transformed existence based on a transformed relationship with God in Christ.

It hardly seems necessary to point out that ‘disciple’ (or ‘learner’) is therefore just another name for ‘Christian’—for someone who has renounced the lie of self-worship that used to be at the centre of their lives. It’s someone who has recognized the dark and lost state in which they were living, and who has turned to Christ in faith as their Master, Saviour and Teacher—to learn to be like him, to learn to keep all his commandments, and to live out that commitment daily and weekly and yearly for the rest of their lives.

The disappearing learner?

One of the curious little mysteries of the New Testament is that there seem to be no ‘disciples’ after the book of Acts. Throughout the Gospels and in Acts, the noun *mathētēs* (‘disciple’ or ‘learner’) appears often as a description of those who have devoted themselves to being learners under Christ. But after a final mention in Acts 21:16, the word promptly disappears. In all the remaining 22 books of the New Testament, no-one is described as a ‘learner’ or ‘disciple’.

Now this is a bit odd, not least because Jesus specifically told his learners (disciples) to go and make more learners (disciples). And it’s not as if they reached a certain stage of development in Acts 21 and then gave up on the task. It’s obvious from the epistles that what the apostles did to make learners in Acts (i.e. to preach the gospel in the power of the Spirit, to baptize people into Christ, and to teach them to keep all his commandments) was what they and the whole apostolic band continued to do everywhere.

In fact, the verb form of ‘disciples’—*manthanō*, ‘to learn’—does appear quite often in the epistles, in connection with the gospel truth that Christians have learned, and the lifestyle or action that goes along with it. See for example Romans 16:17; Philippians 4:9, 11; Colossians 1:5-7; Titus 3:14.

Perhaps the most instructive passage about learning Christ is Ephesians 4:17-5:14. In this passage, Paul contrasts the way of life of the Gentiles with those who have ‘learned Christ’ (v. 20).



Learning Christ

Read Ephesians 4:17-24.

1. What is the condition of those who have not learned Christ?
2. What happens to the minds and actions of those who learn Christ?
3. What is God's ultimate goal for our transformation? (cf. Gen 1:26-27)

Read Ephesians 4:25-32.

4. When we learn Christ, what must change in our relationships with others?
5. What motivations should drive us to change?

Read Ephesians 5:1-14.

6. What will our lives look like if we "walk in love" (v. 2)?

7. What will we change in our lives if we "walk as children of light" (v. 8)?

8. In what ways will we be out of step with the world as we live this way?

9. Why is Christ's sacrifice for us the motivation for such change?

Implications

10. In what areas are you still living as if in darkness?

This question derives from one of the most beautiful and profound prayers of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. It reads:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Learning is not just a matter of hearing or reading the words that God has caused to be written, but of marking, learning and inwardly digesting them. Just as the food that we digest will have an impact on us, so the word of God will have an impact on our lives as we ‘inwardly digest’ it and allow it to transform our thoughts, our actions and our prayers.

This prayer asks that God would grant us a growing intensity of engagement with the word that he has caused to be written for our learning—that we would not just *hear* it, but *read* it for ourselves; that we would not just read it, but *mark* it (i.e. take heed of it, pay careful attention to it—as in the expression ‘mark my words’); that this careful attention would lead us to *learn* the Scriptures, to know them thoroughly and intimately, so that we can readily recall and remember their teaching; and that this learning would penetrate to our souls and become part of us, that we would *inwardly digest* the nourishment of his word.

And ‘inwardly digesting’ the Scriptures will include working out the response of faith and obedience that we need to make and actually making it.

Of course, as we seek to learn Christ and have our lives transformed by his word, prayer is essential. We pray for God to grant us the kind of listening ear and mind and heart that we need, knowing that this in turn will lead to more prayer. The more we absorb and digest the truth of God’s word, and the more our trust and dependence upon it is nourished and strengthened, the more we will be moved to cry out to God in intercession for our families, our neighbours, our friends, and for our whole community of Christ-learners. Indeed, prayer is the primary response of faith for all Christ-learners.

As passages like Matthew 7:21-27 and James 1:22-25 (not to mention the Great Commission itself) make abundantly clear, the life of a Christ-learner is not simply about hearing the word of God or knowing the commands of Jesus. The life of a Christ-learner is about doing what the word of God says and obeying the commands of Jesus. Think personally about these questions to evaluate your progress as a learner of Christ, and (if necessary) make some fresh plans and commitments.

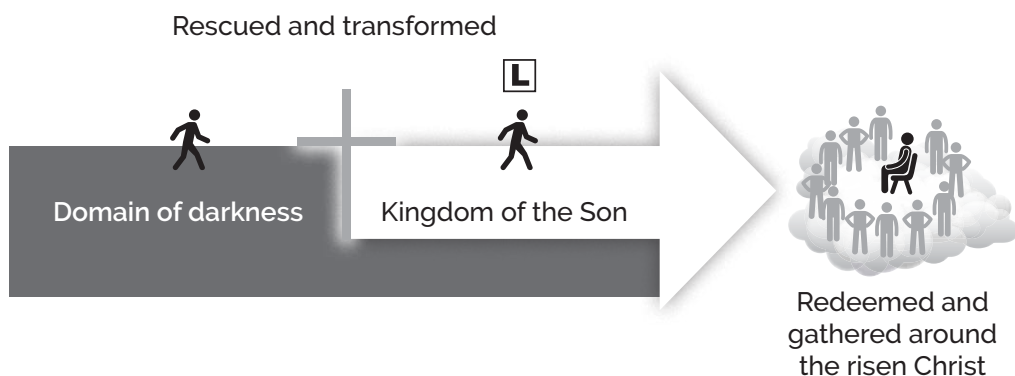
- How much time do I spend each day doing things like reading blogs, websites, newspapers and magazines, using Facebook and other social media, and watching TV?
- How much time do I spend each day reading and mulling over God's word and praying for myself and for others?
- What fresh commitments will I make to daily engage with God in his word and pray to him?
- What can I do to learn more from sermons—both in my understanding and in my practice?

13. As a result of this study, how would you improve this summary statement?

What is a disciple? *A forgiven sinner who is learning Christ in repentance and faith, and being transformed into his likeness to hate sin and love others sacrificially.*

Moving to the right

We could add one small detail to our diagram to represent this idea of a ‘disciple’—namely an ‘L’ (learner) sign above the person who has been transferred out of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son, and who now continues that transformational learning in every sphere of life, especially in the ‘learning community’ that we call ‘church’.¹³



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

¹³ Taken from *The Vine Project*, p. 145.

5. How are disciples made?

Hopefully by now you are convinced of the centrality of disciple-making in God's long-term plan for his Son and his redeemed people (studies 1 and 2). And hopefully you are feeling both joyful and at least a little agitated about what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We receive life in his kingdom by giving up our idols and seeking forgiveness at the cross. And having been redeemed, we live a new life, walking in Jesus' new way of sacrificial love (studies 3 and 4).

So what if we just said, "Get on with it: go make some disciples"?

You might be thinking: "That sounds more like the pastor's job. I haven't done much baptising or teaching lately. I'm not sure where to start. It all sounds rather overwhelming. I'm not great at helping people learn anything, let alone Jesus."

Most of our remaining hesitations probably stem from uncertainty about two key questions: how are disciples made, and who makes disciples? These are the subjects of our next two studies.

So we come first to the 'how' question: *By what method or means is God rescuing and gathering his people into the kingdom of his Son and making them into disciples of Christ?*

It's supremely important that we pose the question in this way, with this grammar—that is, with God as the active subject of the sentence. In thinking about means and methods, and especially about the part that human effort and activity plays in the process of making disciples, we must constantly keep asserting the primacy of God's will and action. As Paul described in 1 Corinthians 3, you may plant and I may water, but it is God who gives the growth. It is only God who gives the growth (vv. 6-7).



Understanding Jesus' commission

Look back at Matthew 28:16-20.

1. What do these verses say about how disciples are made (particularly vv. 19 and 20)?
2. How does Jesus' promise at the end of this passage emphasize the primacy of God's will and action in making disciples? (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-9)
3. Read Luke 24:44-49 (sometimes known as Luke's version of the Great Commission). What historical events, written in Scripture, must be fulfilled?
4. What does Jesus commission his disciples to do?
5. What is Jesus' promise to disciple-makers?

6. From this passage, what do we learn about how disciples are made?

Personal reflection

- By what method did God make you a disciple of Jesus? How does your experience line up with what we've seen so far about God's method for making disciples?
- How confident do you feel about God using you to make disciples? What would you need to learn to get started?



Extra input—baptism and teaching¹⁴

Clearly, baptizing and teaching are the means by which disciples are to be made in Matthew 28.

Baptism is a symbol of the gospel, of washing away the old and starting afresh, of dying and rising again. A new 'learner' was baptized as a vivid way of declaring that he had decisively turned away from his old understanding and life, and had now embarked on the new life that he would learn from his teacher.

Of course, in the case of being initiated into learning Jesus, that repentance was not just a turning away from one's former life, but a recognition that one's former life had been lived in selfishness and rebellion towards God. Repentance was also a plea for forgiveness—for a washing clean of all those thoughts,

¹⁴ Adapted from *The Vine Project*, p. 66.

actions, attitudes and character traits that were contrary to the new kingdom Jesus embodied and taught. Baptism reminds us of Christ's saving work, and is a means of faith and fellowship for his people.

It's not as if baptism and teaching are sequential steps in making disciples. The baptizing implies that the gospel of Jesus' redemption through his death and resurrection has been taught and embraced so that the learner is now ready to submit to Jesus as Lord in faith and repentance. However, making disciples does not end with this conversion, but continues through teaching new disciples to obey all that Jesus taught.

Making disciples throughout Acts

As in Matthew 28, Luke 24 records that the worldwide authority of the crucified and risen Christ means that the good news about Jesus should be preached to all nations, and that repentance and forgiveness (i.e. becoming Jesus' disciple) apply to all nations. The task for the disciples is to declare that news to the world in Spirit-empowered proclamation. This, of course, is exactly what we see happening in Luke's second volume, Acts.

Read Acts 2:1-41.

7. What happened on the day of Pentecost in response to Jesus' commission to make disciples (vv. 1-11; cf. Acts 1:4-8)? What was the significance of the Spirit's coming (vv. 32-36)?
8. What was the central theme of the disciples' teaching (vv. 14-41)?

9. How effective was their disciple-making (vv. 37-41)?

Read Acts 6:7, 12:24, 13:49, 14:21-22 and 19:20.

10. What impact did the word of God have throughout Acts?

Read Acts 4:31, 11:15, 13:52 and 16:6-7.

11. What power was at work as the word was proclaimed?

The four Ps

The making of disciples is first and foremost *God's work*, achieved as his word and Spirit work through the activity of the disciples and in the hearts of those they speak to. And yet in his sovereign kindness, God invites us and commands us to be part of this work. Putting together all that we've seen in this study, we can capture God's method of making disciples, and our part in that work, by the 'four Ps':

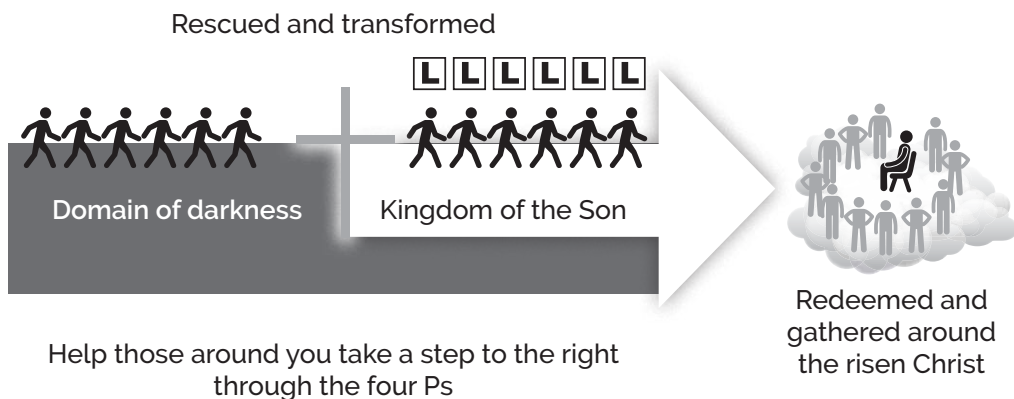
- Proclamation of the word of God
- Prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God
- People as God's fellow workers
- Persevering, step by step¹⁵

Or, in one sentence: *Disciples are made by the persevering proclamation of the word of God by the people of God in prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God.*

¹⁵ For more about the 'four Ps', see the 'Extra input' box at the end of this study.

Helping others take a step to the right

We could modify our diagram again to represent all this:¹⁶



In other words:¹⁷

- By the cross of Christ we are rescued out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom of the Son, and have an eternally secure inheritance in Christ that is already ours.
- Our daily 'walk' is now in the light rather than in the darkness, as day-by-day we live out who we really are (as citizens of Christ's kingdom). We are all at different points on that walk, and need to keep pressing on to what lies ahead. *The movement is always to the right*, as it were.¹⁸ Christ-learners are transformed as they grow to maturity in Christ.
- Those who remain trapped in the domain of darkness are also at different points and have different issues. Some are 'far away' and hard of heart; others are 'closer', in that they are hearing and considering the gospel of Christ.
- Thus, the goal of every form of Christian ministry could be summarized simply as seeking to help each person, wherever they happen to be, to take a step to the right—to come closer towards hearing the gospel and being transferred out of the domain of darkness into the kingdom; and then to press forward towards maturity in Christ in every aspect of their lives.
- The means by which God moves people to the right are: Proclamation, Prayerful dependence on the Spirit, People as his fellow workers, and Persevering step-by-step in this work.¹⁹

¹⁶ Taken from *The Vine Project*, p. 146.

¹⁷ Taken from *The Vine Project*, p. 96.

¹⁸ We might as well get the standard joke out of the way at this point—that growth in Christ does not entail us becoming more politically right wing!

¹⁹ For more on the 'four Ps', see the 'Extra input' box at the end of this study.

Implications

12. How can the ideas presented in this study help to overcome any feelings of inadequacy when it comes to being involved in making disciples? What confidence can we have that God will use our efforts to make disciples by his method (the four Ps)?

13. What are some of the different ways an ordinary 'Christ learner' could help another person learn the word of God?

14. What should we be praying for people as we help them learn Christ?

15. In order to be more effectively involved in making disciples, what will you need to change:
 - in the way you think of other people?

 - in the way you speak to other people?

 - in the time you give to be involved in the lives of other people?

Taking action

Think of someone you know who is finding life hard in this fallen world, and pray about what you could do to help them ‘take a step to the right’ toward maturity in Christ. How could you demonstrate your love for this person? What story could you tell from your life that would point them to Christ? What could you say to them about the truth of Christ? What Scripture passage could you share with them (in person, by email, by card)? What might stop you from taking any action? Or perhaps you can think of someone who’s growing as a disciple—someone who’s faithful, available and teachable—and would benefit from you coming alongside them to help them keep growing.

Resources

The goal of Matthias Media, the publisher of these studies, is to provide resources that help you to help others ‘take a step to the right’ toward maturity in Christ. So they have an extensive range of printed and digital books, Bible studies and courses that you can use. Here are just a few examples of one-to-one Bible studies that you can use as you take the action urged above:²⁰

To explain the gospel to a non-Christian:

You, Me and the Bible

Tough Questions

To grow a new Christian:

Just for Starters

Christian Living for Starters

To keep growing yourself and a more established Christian:

Short Steps for Long Gains

The Blueprint



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

²⁰ You can get more information about (and order) these and many other resources through the Matthias Media website: www.matthiasmedia.com



Extra input—summarising the four Ps²¹

Proclamation of the word of God

The content of the ‘word’ is essentially the plan and promise of God centred on Jesus Christ. This one message about Jesus Christ, in all its dazzling facets, is *the message of the Bible*. We preach the gospel by teaching and explaining the Bible. The Bible is our authoritative and sufficient source for truly and faithfully knowing the gospel and speaking the gospel. If we believe that the Bible is the powerful word of God, then in many respects what we want to see flourish in our church culture is as many instances as possible of the Bible being spoken, read, studied, preached, explained, taught, discussed, memorized, prayed over and meditated upon.

Prayerful dependence on the Spirit of God

When we speak the word—in whatever context or in whatever manner—we are like the sower of Jesus’ parable (Mark 4:1-9). We cannot control or determine what sort of soil the word falls into. Very often our words seem to bounce off the hard surface of people’s foreheads, or penetrate only very slightly and temporarily into their hearts. But when God’s Spirit is present in our hearers to soften the heart, to open the eyes, and to make the soil fertile, then the words we speak become for our hearer the words of eternal life. Our level of trust in this principle will be demonstrated by our constant dependent prayer for God to give the growth (1 Cor 3:6). Prayerlessness, like Wordlessness, is a classic symptom of a sick disciple-making culture.

People are God’s fellow workers

In the new age of the Spirit, *all* God’s people have their mouths opened to speak God’s word by his Spirit—to one another and to the world.²² They will do so in different ways, in different contexts, taking up different opportunities, with different levels of gift, and indeed different levels of responsibility (some will be pastors and teachers). Love is the new commandment that Christ-learners are learning. Love compels us to persevere in laying down our lives and suffering whatever may come, for the sake of seeing people come to Christ and learn Christ.

²¹ Adapted from *The Vine Project*, pp. 84-95.

²² We’ll talk more about this in study 6. See also Lionel Windsor’s excellent little book *Gospel Speech* (Matthias Media, Sydney, 2015).

Persevering, step by step

Christ-learners are ‘made’ patiently and perseveringly over time. We can’t push people to the right if they aren’t ready to move. Although we’ll urge and exhort people with urgency as appropriate, we have to be content with God’s timing as he works in them. And we also need to accept that God often moves people to the right a little bit at a time, rather than in massive leaps and bounds. But the advantage of seeing it as a lot of small steps is that some of those steps seem more achievable for us. If the goal of Christian ministry can be envisaged simply as helping any individual person we know to take one little step to the right (towards Christ or towards maturity in Christ), then this is a task that each and every Christian can embrace with confidence. If we call upon the average church member to take up arms as a gospel minister or a disciple-maker or an evangelist, then (rightly or wrongly) many will feel sufficiently threatened to run in the opposite direction. But what if we were to say the following instead: “Why don’t you pray for the person next to you (wherever that might be), and see if by your word and example you can encourage them to take one step—even one small step—to the right?”

4. What difficulties did they endure in the course of making disciples? (Acts 17:4-9; 1 Thess 1:6)
5. How did they encourage these new disciples to persevere through opposition (1 Thess 1:6-7; 2:13-16)?
6. What do we learn about their prayer for this disciple-making work? (1 Thess 1:2-3)
7. What was the Holy Spirit's part in this work? (1 Thess 1:4-6)
8. What was the result of this disciple-making work? (Acts 17:4; 1 Thess 1:8-10; 2:13-16)
9. What is the evidence that these first converts in Thessalonica went on to become disciple-makers? (1 Thess 1:6-10)

6. Who makes disciples?

So far in our studies, we've looked at what a disciple really is, why 'making' them is so important, and what methods or means God has given us to do so.

In this sixth study, we want to zoom in on one aspect of the 'how' of disciple-making—namely, *which people exactly* are involved in the task, and how we are to understand their different roles and gifts.

We've already considered this briefly in study 5, where we saw that *God's people* are his agents in prayerfully and perseveringly proclaiming the word. Moreover, we suggested that it wasn't just the most committed of God's people, or an elite class of God's people, but *all* of God's people who are granted the joy and privilege of 'making disciples'.

Hopefully you are energized and inspired by the possibility that, as an 'ordinary' learner of Christ, God can use you in a personal way to help others take a step toward salvation and maturity in Christ. Perhaps you have started to imagine reading the Bible with a new person at church, or giving a suitable book to the atheist at work to discuss together, or to pray and dream about what it might mean for you to be involved in this great work of disciple-making.

However, you might still have some lingering doubts about *all* of God's people being urged to engage in the four Ps together: Proclamation, Prayer, People, and Perseverance. In particular, you may feel that the work of *proclamation*—speaking the word—is not for everyone. You may not be fully convinced that this is a biblical expectation. Or you may feel a lack of confidence in how you could speak with others for their salvation and growth.



Getting started

1. How did you go with the 'Taking action' challenge at the end of study 5, to help a brother or sister take a step to the right?

2. What are your questions or uncertainties about *all* disciples being called upon to make disciples?



Understanding Jesus' commission

Look back at Matthew 28:16-20 and think back to our earlier studies.

3. What evidence can you see within these verses that Jesus intended all his disciples, not just the first eleven, to be disciple-makers?
4. What truths should make us passionate about making disciples of Jesus, even if we feel a lack of ability and experience?
5. What truths should make us confident about making disciples of Jesus?

Why do disciples speak the word?

By now you are familiar with God's method of making disciples, the four Ps: Proclamation, Prayer, People, and Perseverance.

'Proclamation' may sound fairly grand, like an announcement from a king preceded by a trumpet. Whenever we speak God's word, it does come from the King, but there are many forms of speaking, as we shall see.

We speak because we are saved

Read Luke 6:43-45.

6. What does our speech reveal about our hearts?

Read Psalm 51:7-15.

7. What happens to the speech of those who are forgiven and cleansed in heart by the Holy Spirit?

We speak because we are filled with the Spirit

Read 1 Corinthians 12:3, 2 Corinthians 4:13-15 and Ephesians 5:18-20.

8. In what ways is our speech transformed by the saving work of God by his Spirit?

We speak to encourage and build the church

9. Read the following passages. Break into a few groups, divide the passages between your groups, and complete the table. Then come back together and briefly share your answers.

	What do you learn about the nature of speaking the word and the different forms this takes?	What reasons or motivations are given for all learners of Christ to be speaking the word to others?
Ephesians 4:11-16		
Colossians 3:12-17		
Colossians 4:2-6		
1 Thessalonians 1:4-10		

1 Thessalonians 5:11-14		
Hebrews 3:13; 10:24-25		
1 Peter 4:7-11 ²³		

- 10.** In summary, what does the Bible say about all of God's people speaking the word to others?
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- 11.** Why should we be confident that God would use us as we speak the word to each other?

23 Sometimes we use the doctrine of gifts to disable rather than enable. So we read this passage as a justification for *not* speaking, by concluding (perhaps with relief): "I have the gift of service, not speaking". But the logic of the passage is that love will drive us to service of all kinds, including speaking, and that we will do so "by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (v. 11).

Implications

- 12.** Consider this proposition. Do you strongly agree, mildly agree or disagree? Why?

There is ample and strong evidence that speaking the word of God to others for their salvation and encouragement is an expected and necessary component of the normal Christian life. Correspondingly, a healthy church culture is one in which a wide variety of word ministries are exercised by a constantly growing proportion of the membership. (*The Vine Project*, p. 110)

- 13.** How would you respond to this sort of objection:

“What of the doctrine of gifts and their diversity? What about those who just don’t seem remotely ready or capable of speaking the word of God? Many of our church members give administrative or practical help—being on a roster, organizing or running something, helping with property or other practical tasks, and so on. All of these can contribute to the work of disciple-making without every person having to do the specific work of disciple-making for themselves.”

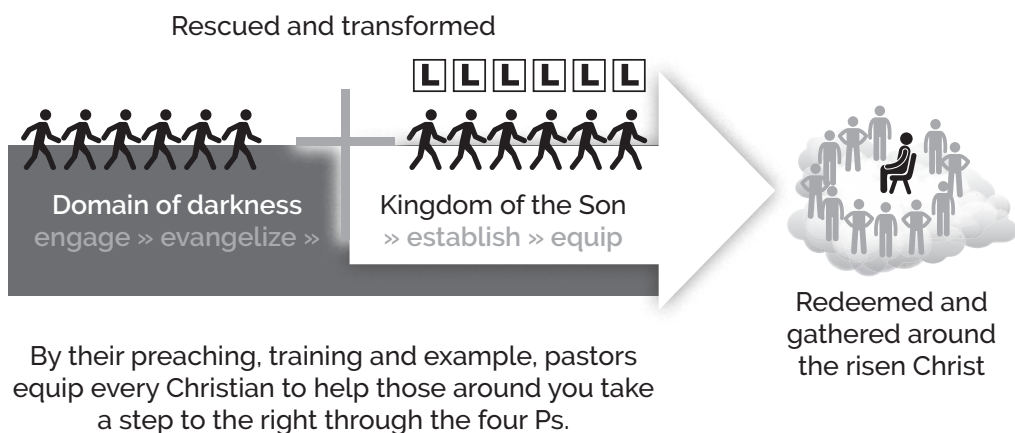
- 14.** What examples do you see in your church or ministry of “a wide variety of word ministries being exercised by a constantly growing proportion of the membership”?

- 15.** What do you think are the main reasons that many people in our churches are not engaged in speaking the word to others in the church, home or community? How could we address a lack of motivation for speaking the word—in ourselves and in our church?
- 16.** What skills or tools could help you grow in confidence in making disciples by speaking the word to others? For example, how could you grow in your ability to:
- explain the gospel to an unbeliever?
 - read and understand the Bible?
 - share your story of becoming a disciple of Christ?
 - answer tough questions about Christianity?
 - read the Bible with another person?

So in conclusion, we could answer the question ‘who makes disciples?’ as follows:

By their preaching, training and example, pastors equip every Christian to be a Christ-learner who helps others to learn Christ.

Or to use our language of ‘moving to the right’, we could change the summary statement at the bottom of our diagram to reflect this integrated picture of the disciple-making church.²⁴



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

²⁴ Taken from *The Vine Project*, p. 148.



Extra input—was Jesus' commission for all disciples or only for the eleven?²⁵

There are several reasons why the commission must be addressed to all disciples of all generations:

1. Jesus promised that he would be with his disciples to the end of the age by clothing them with power from on high (Matt 28:20; Luke 24:49). This promise was enacted on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2, where all 120 disciples who were gathered were “filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4; cf. 1:12-15). They spoke “the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11) in the death and resurrection of Jesus the long awaited Christ or Messiah (Acts 2:33-36).

The age of the Messiah has dawned, in which the Spirit is poured out on *all* his people (Acts 2:17, Joel 2:28-29), and the clear evidence of this (according to Peter) is the extraordinary phenomenon they are witnessing—the outbreak of prophecy on the lips of all God’s people. In other words, the remarkable events at Pentecost indicate that a new state of affairs is now in place. Those who repent and put their faith in Jesus the Christ will all be filled with the promised Holy Spirit, as Peter affirms to the crowd at the end of his sermon (Acts 2:38-39). They will then ‘prophesy’ the “testimony of Jesus” (Rev 19:10).

This would lead us to expect a corresponding flowering of Spirit-inspired utterance among God’s people—and this is indeed what we see unfolding in the rest of the New Testament. In Acts and in the epistles we see a flourishing of gospel-driven, Spirit-empowered speech not just via the apostles and evangelists and pastors and elders, but in the mouths of believers generally.

2. Jesus’ instruction to “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19-20 is not just a specific word to the apostles gathered around him at the time of his final resurrection appearance. The first disciples were instructed to “make disciples” of others. And because these newly-made disciples were under the universal lordship of Christ, and were to obey everything that Jesus had taught, they fell under exactly the same obligation as the original twelve to get on with the job of announcing the lordship of Christ; as did their hearers, and so on “to the end of the age”.

Don Carson concludes that “the injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their own role as disciples (v. 16). Therefore they are paradigms

²⁵ Adapted from *The Vine Project*, pp. 103-109.

for all disciples... It is binding on *all* Jesus' disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Jesus Christ."²⁶

3. There is a simple strategic necessity for all disciples to make disciples. How else will God's plan for the nations to learn Christ and follow him be achieved?

However, it is also important that we preserve the unique place of the eleven disciples (or 'apostles') in God's disciple-making purposes. They are the ones who received the commission in the first instance to call all people to obey what Jesus had taught them. In God's providence, it is in the apostles' written word that we find the teaching of Jesus. This apostolic gospel, enshrined in Scripture, is our link to Jesus' word and his mission. We become disciples by hearing and obeying Jesus' teaching, mediated to us through these specially commissioned apostles. As disciple-makers we simply repeat the apostles' teaching over and over again.



Extra input—lack of motivation: a heart problem²⁷

Although speaking the word of God is a unique and spiritual activity, it is like other human speech in this sense: when something is really important to us, we can't help but speak about it to the people we love.

This is essentially why we don't speak the word of God more to the people around us. We don't value the word enough, and we don't love people enough. It's a heart problem—our hearts are not sufficiently fired by the wonder of God's mercies and the majesty of Jesus Christ; and our hearts are not sufficiently full of love and compassion for those around us.

So here's a question, which (by now, if not before) you should quickly be able to answer: *How can a loveless human heart be transformed?*

Answer: by the power of the word of God and the Spirit of God, ministered in prayerful, persevering proclamation by his people! We need to teach and pray that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened to grasp the hope to which he has called us, and the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe (Eph 1:18-19). And we need to teach and pray that the Lord would cause our people to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all" (1 Thess 3:12).

26 DA Carson, 'Matthew' in Frank E Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984, p. 596.

27 Taken from *The Vine Project*, pp. 113-114.



Extra input—so what is the role of pastors in speaking the word and making disciples?²⁸

If we acknowledge that there are varying forms of the ministry of the word, how are we to understand the relationship between them—and especially between the formal, regular, authoritative, recognized form of that ministry (the preaching and teaching undertaken by the pastor of a congregation), and the informal, often temporary, frequently unrecognized and less authoritative forms of word ministry that congregation members will undertake?

The word ministry of pastoral leadership takes on an even greater importance when it is seen in relation to a flourishing ‘every member word ministry’. For the sermon is not just one word ministry among many; it is the foundational word ministry that feeds, regulates and builds all the others. In a church where the four Ps are being widely practised by many believers across the congregation, the sermon is an occasion not just where one man speaks, but where he teaches a multitude to speak. In his preaching, a pastor sounds the tuning fork so that the whole orchestra knows in what key to play. He teaches and guards the sound deposit of the gospel so that all may know it clearly and thoroughly (for how else will they speak it?). He shows them not only what the Bible says, but how they can read and speak that truth for themselves. He constantly teaches the sound doctrinal framework that shapes the Bible reading and speaking of the whole congregation.

Pastors are ‘learners-in-chief’, who serve as examples, guides, shepherds, teachers and equippers of the other learners over whom they have oversight. The Sunday sermon is the weekly flagship event that encapsulates that ministry. It is, of course, not the only thing the pastor does. But it is of fundamental importance to the church, because it anchors and builds an expository church—that is, a church in which every aspect of the congregational life is centred on the speaking of the Bible’s message concerning Jesus Christ.

At some point you might find it a useful exercise to study these passages on the role of pastors and leaders in speaking the word, and how this ministry relates to the ministry of an entire church: Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Timothy 4:6-16; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:7-8; 1 Peter 5:1-5.

²⁸ Taken from *The Vine Project*, pp. 116-117.

7. Where are disciples made?

In our previous six studies, we investigated important questions about discipleship and disciple-making: why we should make disciples, what a disciple actually is, how we go about making disciples, and who does the work. In these final two studies, we're thinking about the *field* in which disciple-making takes place—the *where* of recruiting and teaching 'learners' of Christ. That is, in what contexts, locations, events and activities should disciple-making take place?

Having covered so much ground already, this final subject might not seem quite so important at first, but it is actually more important than we might think. One of the barriers to a thoroughgoing disciple-making culture in many churches and ministries is a misunderstanding of exactly where disciple-making should happen.

For many churches, making disciples has two main locations. Firstly, when it comes to 'making disciples of all nations', it's common for this to be viewed mainly as a missionary enterprise that should be taking place literally in the other 'nations'—that is, in an overseas location somewhere. For many churches, a Great Commission commitment means having a missions budget, supporting overseas mission agencies, praying for missionaries, and so on. The often unstated and misguided assumption here is that the 'nations' (that is, the people over there in other countries) need to hear the gospel and become disciples of Jesus, but that somehow our own location—our street or suburb or community—is less of a concern.

Secondly, the default understanding in many churches is that local discipleship takes place in a *private* location. 'Discipling' is usually seen as personal, intimate work. It happens in one-to-one meetings, in coffee shops, in long walks where we talk about our Christian lives, or perhaps in small groups that meet in people's homes. For many people, 'discipling' is often particularly associated with spending time with new believers to ground them in the basics of the faith. Accordingly, if we wanted to improve 'discipleship' or 'discipling' in our church, we would mainly be thinking about places or contexts *outside* of our regular Sunday church gathering.

Having looked at Matthew 28 and the Great Commission multiple times throughout these studies, you'll know that Jesus explicitly locates the field of disciple-making as 'the nations' (Matt 28:19). But who or what exactly is he referring to, and where do the 'nations' fit in God's long-term plan? Where exactly should disciple-making happen?



Making disciples in the nations

Genesis 11 records the construction of the Tower of Babel, which led God to confuse the languages of the people and disperse them all over the earth as a judgement for their godless pride.

Read Genesis 12:1-3 and 17:1-8.

1. What was God's plan for Abraham, his descendants, and all other peoples?

Quickly read Matthew 1:1, 2:1-2, 8:5-13, 10:18, 13:38 and 24:14.

2. How does Matthew show that Jesus came to fulfil the promise to Abraham to include the nations in God's kingdom?

Read Matthew 4:15-16 and 12:18-21.

3. How does Jesus fulfil these Old Testament prophecies concerning the nations?

Read Ephesians 2:11-18.

4. Through the death of Christ, what is God's plan for the Gentile nations?



Extra input—the nations²⁹

We tend to think of ‘the nations’ as overseas countries, but that is not really what Jesus had in mind. He was talking about the peoples of the world—all the massive variety of nations and tribes and tongues and races, out of which Old Testament Israel was called to be God’s treasured possession among all peoples, his ‘holy nation’ (Exodus 19:5-6). This non-Jewish ‘rest of the world’ is routinely called the ‘nations’ or ‘Gentiles’ in the New Testament.

Perhaps we can start to feel what a radical and shocking statement this might have been for the eleven disciples there on the mountain with Jesus when we consider not only all that they had witnessed, but also all their expectations about God and his people. The Jewish Messiah had risen from the grave to save his people and be the ruler of all. But his commission to them was not to make disciples of Israel, but of the *nations*—those who were ‘far off’ (cf. Acts 2:39; Eph 2:17): the pagans, the very people who were considered so unclean and defiled that a Jew was not even allowed to eat with them. It was a commission to make disciples of the enemy, of the despised heathens who had defeated and oppressed Israel for centuries.

But even throughout the Old Testament, God had always been concerned with the fate of the nations. In many ways, the story of the Old Testament is the story of Israel being called out from among the nations as God’s special, holy, treasured possession, in order that they might be a blessing to the nations, a kingdom of priests to represent God to the world. Exodus 19:1-6 makes this clear: the reason God had redeemed Israel out of Egypt to be his own treasured possession was in order for them to be a “kingdom of priests”—to mediate God to the nations. The ultimate vocation of Israel was to be the vehicle of salvation and light and blessing to the whole earth.

Sadly, Israel repeatedly fails in this vocation, and ends up being more like a curse than a blessing to the nations. The prophets arise and declare judgement on the people of Israel for their rebelliousness and faithlessness, and declare that Israel will be exiled and scattered among the nations because of its sin. But at the same time, the prophets look forward to a time when God would send his Servant, through whom Israel would finally and truly be “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6).

Thus, when Jesus calls on the disciples to go and “make disciples of all nations”, it is a climactic moment in salvation history. The Messiah has come. He has died, and he has been raised as the Saviour and King—not only of

²⁹ Taken from *The Vine Project*, pp. 126-127.

Israel, but of all the nations—of every tribe and clan and culture in all the earth. Now, he sends out his ‘learners’—those who have turned back to him, and have been forgiven, and have devoted themselves to learning his ways—to make other ‘learners’ who will do the same.

In other words, the ‘community of learners’ that Jesus is building now functions as the royal priesthood that Israel was always meant to be. We are called out of the world (while still living in the world) in order that we might proclaim Christ: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

5. As we make disciples, how are we connected to God's promise of blessing to the nations in Abraham?

6. Given that “the nations” refers to “all the peoples of the world” rather than “overseas countries”, what might this mean for your church in making disciples?

7. The Great Commission is "a climactic moment in salvation history", the culmination of God's plans to save people from all tribes, tongues and races. How does this shape your understanding of the place that disciple-making should have in the lives of all God's people, including your own life?

8. Based on everything we've seen in this study so far, how would you answer the question: where should disciples be made?

The danger of the 'ghetto mentality'

Most churches struggle to look out beyond their doors, and the boundaries of their fellowship, to the neighbours, peoples, subcultures and communities all around them that are in desperate need of Christ. We tend to default to an inward-looking sort of clubbishness, to a comfortable satisfaction with ourselves and our own friends and community. We find it hard to change and put ourselves out for the sake of reaching people who are different from us, who aren't part of our ethnic or cultural family, whom we might dislike, or with whom we feel nothing in common.

This is nothing new. In fact, the apostles and other early disciples struggled mightily with the implications of Jesus' universal mission to make disciples of the nations. Their mission may have been the culmination of God's historic plans; and it may have been the inescapable consequence of the worldwide reign of Jesus the Messiah. But this doesn't mean that the Jewish ethnocentrism of the apostles dissolved overnight. The first half of the book of Acts chronicles their growing understanding that taking the gospel to the nations meant taking it to people that they had, to this point, regarded as beyond the pale—as pagans and heathens whose houses they would not even enter.

Read Acts 10:9-35.

9. What change of heart and understanding did God achieve in Peter (see especially vv. 34-35)?

Read Acts 10:36-48.

10. After Peter preaches the gospel to those present, what happens next?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19-27 and 10:31-11:1.

11. How did Paul deal with ethnocentric, tribal, inward-looking thinking and behaviour in himself and in churches?

Implications

12. Why do we often find it so hard to *go out* to people who are different from us and reach them where they are?

13. Why do we also find it hard to *welcome in* people who are different from us, that they might learn Christ in our midst?
14. Think of as many subcultures or communities that you are in contact with (individually or as a church) as possible. How successfully are you reaching out to make learners of Christ in these communities?
15. If people from some of these communities came to your church, what would they find helpful or unhelpful about your current church meetings? What traditions, practices and cultural trappings are you willing (or unwilling) to change for the sake of your guests at church?



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

8. Making disciples in our church community and home

As we take the gospel to the peoples beyond our church to make new disciples (as seen in the previous study), so we gather in our church communities to continue the disciple-making process of growing in maturity in Christ.

We saw in study 5 that ‘learning Christ’ happens wherever the word of God and the Spirit of God are at work over time through people—because that is how ‘learning’ Christ takes place.

This means that ‘discipling’ can and should happen in any and every sphere of our lives and our church communities. Everything we do, promote and facilitate as a church community—personally, in pairs, in groups, or when we’re all together for our main gathering—should teach and model Christ, so that all may learn Christ.

In short, we should think of our churches as learning communities.

In his wisdom, God draws us together as churches and gives us each other—not only because our eternal destiny is to be gathered together around Jesus Christ in redeemed wonder and joy and celebration, but because we need each other. God gives us each other as the means by which we hear the word of Christ and learn Christ.

To put it another way, we’ve been adopted into God’s eternal family. Families hang out together, talk together, share joys and sorrows, eat together, and generally love each other. It’s what families do because they share such a deep bond with one another. And likewise with church—except that the bond we share is even more profound. It’s a spiritual family bond created by God himself through his Spirit and the Lord Jesus Christ. Church is the family gathering that God the Father himself has called together, as part of his majestic plan to save and gather his people around the Lord Jesus Christ.

The book of Hebrews is an extended warning or exhortation to keep going as disciples of Jesus Christ in the face of false teaching and persecution. Faced with these pressures, the readers were in danger of drifting away (Hebrews 2:1; 12:1-3; 13:22), and the writer was worried that they were neglecting to meet together.



Learning communities

Read Hebrews 10:1-25.

1. What false understanding of how we are cleansed from sin is addressed (vv. 1-10)?
2. What is God's way of dealing with sin (vv. 11-18)?
3. What are the two actions that should follow from God's way of dealing with sin (vv. 19-25)?

Read Hebrews 3:12-14.

4. From this passage and from Hebrews 10 (especially vv. 24-25), why do we need each other as church family? What should motivate us to meet together, and what should we be considering as we come to church?



Extra input—loving by speaking³⁰

The Bible's most extended discussion of the dynamics and purpose of church is found in 1 Corinthians 12-14.

This section of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is famous for its beautiful description of love in chapter 13, read at so many weddings and found on so many sunset posters. But this great 'love' passage is really about church. The one abiding and ultimate principle that should drive everything about our church gatherings is love—not love in the sense of 'I love ice cream' or 'I love playing golf', but love as a constant attitude that seeks the good of other people rather than myself.

Paul's big point is that if we are to be driven by love, our aim at church should be to build up and encourage *other people*—rather than thinking about how much we're getting out of it or whether we've had a chance to exercise our gifts. Love does not insist on its own way or press its own claims. It is not obsessed with its own enjoyment or convenience. Love doesn't complain or grumble, or stay at home in bed because it couldn't be bothered. Love seeks the good of the other—patiently, kindly, truthfully, joyfully, and constantly.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul also makes clear that the *way* he wants the Corinthians to build one another in love is through how they speak—not in tongues that others don't understand, but in intelligible words that bring the word of God to each other (especially in what he calls 'prophecy').

The details of what Paul means by 'prophecy', and how exactly it should take place, are open to some debate. But Paul's main point is very clear: he wants the Corinthians to come to church with love in their hearts for one another, and to express that love by sharing the truth of God's word with each other in whatever way they can.

Church is not about me. It's not about the experience I have or what I get out of it. Church is a golden opportunity to love my brothers and sisters who are there, by seeking to build them up in Christ.

³⁰ Taken from Tony Payne's *How to Walk Into Church*, Matthias Media, Sydney, 2015.

8. To the best of your knowledge, how effective are your regular small groups and other groups (e.g. occasional training groups) as communities where members are learning Christ in a way that transforms their lives?

9. What is the value of meeting one-to-one in helping others learn Christ and grow in him? How might this type of ministry grow within your church?

The home as a context for making disciples

If disciples are made in the life of the church, and in the nations, where does the home fit?

For many churches, the Sunday gathering has long been understood as the gathering of Christian households that have ‘churched’ throughout the week. Family worship or devotions were embedded in the normal rhythm of godly family life. Indeed, what better context could there be for ‘learning Christ’ than in the day-to-day relationships of the home, where the Bible is read, prayers are offered, and the gracious lifestyle of the gospel is on show through all the ups and downs of family life?

The gospel transforms the created order, including marriage, family and all social relationships, as part of God’s new creation in Christ. The Christian household is renewed by the word of God so that it reflects the love and peace of Christ in its interpersonal relationships.

10. Complete the table, answering the questions from each passage (you may like to break into three groups and report back on one passage each).

	Ephesians 6:1-4	Colossians 3:18-4:1	1 Peter 2:18-3:7
How are wives and husbands to relate to each other in Christ?			
How are parents to discipline and instruct children in the Lord?			
How did relationships work with servants who worked in the household?			
How should love transform household relationships (cf. Colossians 3:8-17)?			

Church and household

In the renewed Christian household, the extreme sociological and ethno-religious divisions of the ancient world—between Jew and Gentile, free and slave, man and woman, upper and lower classes—were overturned. The Christian household was not only the nucleus of the church, but provided a compelling witness to the surrounding community of the transformative learning of Christ.

How do we make disciples in the home? By way of the same four Ps as in the church and in the world! If we think of our homes as ‘little churches’ and lead them accordingly, we won’t go too far wrong.

In practical terms, this means that, in thinking about how we are going to teach, motivate, support and equip all our people to be Christ-learners who in turn help others to learn Christ, we must not exclude the home as a key location in which this vital work takes place.

The home is like a nexus where the church and the world meet. It is both a location where much fruitful ‘4P ministry’ can take place—between husbands and wives, parents and children, extended family, or friends and housemates—and a little pocket of Christ’s kingdom exists, bearing witness in streets and neighbourhoods to the transforming effect of the gospel.

Implications

11. What ambitions for our children are sometimes at odds with the goal of discipleship? How might the ideas we’ve seen throughout these studies transform these ambitions?

12. What will our homes look like if they are transformative learning communities based around the gospel? As well as offering a general description, try to think of some specific examples. How does this compare to what they look like now?

13. How could you benefit from the experiences and wisdom of other Christian families when it comes to making disciples in the home? How could you share your experience and wisdom with others?
14. How can our church programs increase home-based discipleship (rather than replace it)?
15. How do you think the Bible's teaching about households applies to the increasingly common phenomenon of single people sharing a house together? How might these ideas apply to Christians living alone?

Where, then, does learning Christ take place? *It happens in every facet and activity of the transformative learning communities we call 'churches'. In particular, it happens within our households. Through our churches and our households, it also happens in every corner of this present darkness.*



Give thanks and pray about the things you've seen in this study.

Conclusion: Final implications

Throughout these studies, we have been learning about 'learning Christ'. The purpose of this learning is to receive life in Jesus' kingdom (received primarily through faith in his death for us and his resurrection) and to live a new life to his glory.

Therefore, it would seem a waste to complete these studies without nailing down our learning.

Here are some final questions to ponder and pray over. Share these matters with your small group or team for serious prayer for each other.

Moving to the right yourself (or learning Christ)

Think about these questions to evaluate your progress as a learner of Christ, and make some fresh plans and commitments.

1. Where have you seen opportunities to better use your time to learn Christ?
2. What fresh commitments will you make to daily engage with God in his word and pray to him? What other specific steps can you take to spend more time learning Christ?

3. What can I do to learn more from sermons and small group Bible studies in both understanding and practice?

Moving others to the right (or helping others to learn Christ)

Think through the different spheres of life: household, world, small group, and church.

What would it mean for you to live and breathe your convictions about disciple-making in each of these contexts? Work out *one action* you wish to take in each sphere to move others to the right, and prayerfully commit yourself to do so over the next few months. Here are some thoughts and examples to spark your thinking in each area.

Household

What is one new habit you could form (or resurrect) to grow your household as a 'learning Christ' community?

Think about the rhythm of your day and week as a family. When are the regular times you could utilize for discussion, Bible reading and prayer? If there are no regular times (if it is all total chaos!), are there some changes you need to make to carve out some time?

Think and pray about each member of your family. Can you think of one issue, one truth, or one particular struggle where each person needs help? What could you do to help them 'move to the right' in that area?

World

Think of three unbelieving friends you'd like to pray for and try to engage with about Christ. In addition to praying that they would become disciples of Jesus, what is an achievable next step for each one of them?

Think and pray towards reading the Bible personally with someone who wants

(or needs) to know Christ. Invite them to read Colossians or Mark's Gospel using the Swedish Method or 'COMA'³¹ or try something like *You, Me and the Bible*.³²

Small group

If we are serious about infusing disciple-making into our whole church, our small groups will need to be incubators of this culture. And there's no better place to start than in an existing group or class. What would it mean to start shifting the culture of your group in the direction we've been discussing? You could, for example:

- Meet one-to-one with one of the younger or less mature Christians in the group to establish them in the faith, and to equip them to bring the gospel to their family and their networks.
- Start sharpening and clarifying the convictions of the group about disciple-making (e.g. by working through *The Course of Your Life* or by reading *The Thing Is*).³³
- Equip the group with some basic ministry skills and experience, using resources such as *Six Steps to Loving Your Church*, *Two Ways to Live: Know and Share the Gospel*, *Six Steps to Talking About Jesus*, or *One-to-One Bible Reading*.³⁴

The value of working on these sorts of skills in small groups is that you can practise together and continue to review what you've learned. You can urge each other to actually use what you've learned, and you can share stories of success and struggles. Leaders can also model how they use these disciple-making skills and tools.

Church

What would it look like if you, your small group and/or your team demonstrated what it means to come to church to help others learn Christ—that is, if you began to put into practice your sharpened convictions about church being a place for disciple-making? Are there areas of church life that you could work on together—like welcoming and following up newcomers (to move them to the right)?

31 For more on the Swedish Method or COMA, see David Helm, *One to One Bible Reading: A simple guide for every Christian*.

32 This is a six-part guide with optional video resources by Tony Payne, designed specifically to help you read the Bible with an unbelieving friend. Visit matthiasmedia.com for details. Both resources are available from matthiasmedia.com.

33 Both resources are written by Tony Payne and are available at matthiasmedia.com. For more details about *The Course of Your Life*, visit matthiasmedia.com/coyl.

34 These resources are all available from matthiasmedia.com.

For some practical ideas on how to get started, read and discuss *How to Walk Into Church*.³⁵

All of the above are just suggestions. Really there is an almost infinite number of initiatives we can take to help move others to the right as disciples or Christ-learners. The number is only limited by our imaginations and by the needs of the specific people the Lord has placed around us. The key thing is to take the time to stop, think, plan, and be intentional about achieving the goal. The Lord Jesus has commissioned us to play our part in the greatest work in the history of the world. Let's get on with the job.

³⁵ You could also work through the small group resource *Six Steps to Loving Your Church*, which covers the same material as *How to Walk Into Church*. Both resources are available at matthiasmedia.com.



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What is The Vine Project?



Undertaken by a church leadership team, the Vine Project is a five-phase process designed to foster a church-wide culture change towards having disciple-making as the driving agenda and key priority of all aspects of the life of the church and the individuals in it. If your church leaders are not already engaged in this process, you might like to let them know about the following resources.

THE BOOK

In *The Vine Project* book, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne provide the basic roadmap—guiding the ministry leadership team through the process for growth and change, with biblical input, practical ideas, resources, case studies, exercises and projects along the way. You will be helped to:

- clarify and sharpen your convictions (Phase 1)
- reform your own personal life to express these convictions (Phase 2)
- honestly evaluate every aspect of your current church (or ministry) culture (Phase 3)
- devise some key plans for change and put them into effect (Phase 4)
- keep the momentum going and overcome obstacles (Phase 5).



THE WORKSHOP

The Vine Project Workshop (DVD and Workbook)

Any church leadership team can get a head start on the Vine Project journey by participating in a one-day workshop together using this workbook and the four video sessions containing a total of around 4½ hours of valuable content and guidance.

Tony Payne and Marty Sweeney will provide you with an overview of the main principles, guide you through the key steps, offer insights and ideas for solving common issues, and illustrate with a concrete example from the real-life experience of one church that has been implementing change for over five years. They'll also get your team started on the process of evaluating and innovating.

It's a highly recommended first step on the path to a new disciple-making culture.

For more information about the book and workshop, visit

www.matthiasmedia.com

The website



The team at Vinegrowers runs *The Vine Project* website, a site dedicated to helping churches become more effectively engaged in disciple-making—in other words, helping them create a culture where making disciples in obedience to the Great Commission of Jesus is the normal agenda and priority. The site offers community, coaching and resources.

COMMUNITY

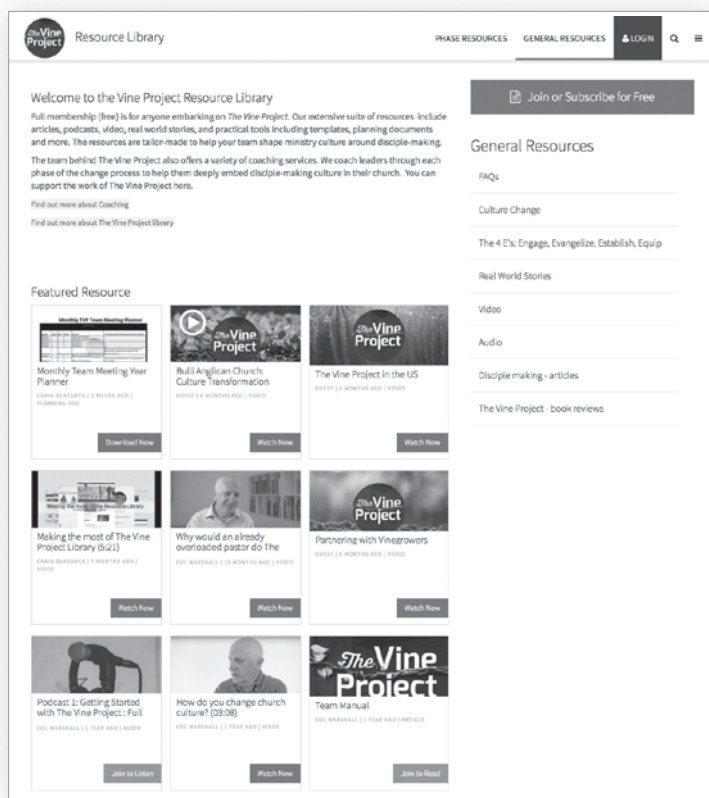
The site supports and connects an online community of like-minded leaders who are all passionately committed to disciple-making culture change in their own church or other ministry context.

COACHING

The Vine Project team offers individual and group coaching to support pastors and ministry leaders who are engaged in disciple-making in their church or other ministry organization. Coaching provides a robust, accountable, and structured process designed to grow and equip church leaders to lead change well.

RESOURCES

Both the Vine Project team and the wider online community develop and share resources that are tailor-made to help your team shape ministry culture around disciple-making. This extensive suite of resources includes articles, podcasts, videos, real world stories, and practical tools including templates, planning documents and more. All of these resources are available free online in the Vine Project Resource Library.



For more information, visit www.thevineproject.com