

Discipleship: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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INTRODUCTION

If we are to understand the critical task of the church to make disciples at the very start of the twenty-first century, then we must carefully construct a solid biblical, theological and historical foundation which has its roots firmly planted in the New Testament, its branches swaying in the last breezes of the Enlightenment and its topmost growth reaching out to the still uncertain air of Post-modernism.

If we are to avoid the oft-told tale of placing new patches of discipleship programming on the old wineskins of a truncated ecclesiology, then we must compare and contrast the pure and golden age of New Testament discipleship with the hyper-dynamic cultural change we are currently involved in. Therefore, the primary strokes of this paper are painted in theological, contextual and historical hues.

In a previous paper I have explored the centrality of the phrase “make disciples” in the Great Commission as given by Matthew. The understanding of the Great Commission was greatly enhanced by linking both the commission and its major terms with the narratives and discourses which preceded it. “The theme of discipleship is central to Matthew’s gospel and to Matthew’s understanding of the church and mission” (Bosch 1997:73).

More than any other text in the Bible, Matthew’s ‘Great Commission’ has been used by the Protestant missionary movement to inspire and shape its outreach to people across the globe. This important text has often been lifted out of its context and has been subject to either limited or wrong understandings.

Although there is no consensus by scholars regarding the exact nature of the structure of Matthew, it is clear that both the narrative and discourse material are carefully constructed and linked together both by a number of structures and common themes. These themes are

developed throughout the gospel and are encountered one final time in the giving of the Great Commission.

The theme of Christ's authority and Lordship is central to the gospel and the final commission. The right of Jesus to rule is both attested and contested in Matthew. The same questions raised by the religious leaders of the Jews will no doubt be raised by the leaders of the nations as well. As such, Matthew has provided the missionary disciples a wonderful compendium of material on how Jesus handled questions of His authority.

Disciples are to be made through responding to the call to be baptized and following the teachings of Jesus. Again, Matthew has given a wealth of material which the disciples can use as they go forth in obedience to the Great Commission. The calls to follow Jesus in commitment are both frequent and diverse.

Over twenty-five percent of Matthew is filled with rich discourse, with the Sermon on the Mount being the largest single unit of Christ's teachings in the four gospels. Along with the narratives that surround the discourses, the disciples have a large storehouse from which to bring forth things new and old. Lastly, the promise of Christ's presence continues to echo until the gospel is preached as a witness to all the nations.

From the above brief summation and conclusions it is evident that Matthew's book could be seen as a manual on discipleship. Although it might not be possible to conclude that Matthew wrote or that the apostles used the book for this purpose, it is clear that there is abundant justification to do so.

Seeking to further buttress the biblical and theological foundation of making disciples, I have researched and am in the process of writing an expose' of the seminal importance of the Holy Spirit and discipleship as portrayed in Luke-Acts. In this regard: "Luke 4:16-21 has, for all practical purposes, replaced Matthew's 'Great Commission' as the key text not only for understanding Christ's own mission but also that of the church" (Bosch 1997:84).

As such, Luke 4:16-21 is seen as “being of programmatic significance” (Marshall 1971:91). The same Spirit which rests upon the Messiah will soon be promised and given in abundance to the waiting and praying community of disciples at Pentecost.

Luke's pneumatology was one of the first aspects of his theology that came to be studied for itself. More than any other New Testament author Luke speaks of the Spirit of God and it is commonly observed that the Spirit is 'the connecting thread which runs through both parts' of his work,' or the 'unifying force throughout Luke's narrative'" (Verheyden 1999:41).

Originally, I was going to have a section connected with Luke-Acts which dealt with the context of the early church and discipleship. But having accumulated over fifty pages of quotations and a multitude of important themes, I thought it best to place the New Testament contextual picture in the same gallery as the Enlightenment and Post-Modern periods.

Therefore, this discussion of discipleship will envelope the New Testament, the Modern and the Post-Modern contexts with the specific aim to uncover the dynamics which have hindered or aided the process of making disciples.

CHAPTER 1

DISCIPLESHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

This first section focuses on how an intimate and inclusive community of believers was able to witness and minister to the highly diverse and condensed urban reality from which it grew.

The Urban Reality of the New Testament

Perhaps the first thing one would notice approaching a Greco-Roman city of the first century was the smell. Because of limited water, means of sanitation and the incredible density of humanity and animals, most of the people in the cities “must have lived in filth beyond our imagining” (Stark 1991:153). The crowded streets were churning with mud, open sewers, manure and crowds which created a stench that must have been “overpowering for many miles—especially in warm weather no wonder they were so fond of incense” (Stark 1991:154).

Compared to modern cities, urban areas in Paul’s day were “very small” (Meeks 1983:28). Many cities such as Antioch were originally founded as walled fortresses. Urban centers tended to develop within these limited confines which could easily be walked in an afternoon.

Unable to expand economically beyond the walls, the population density of these cities was very high. The immediate environs of Antioch probably housed about 150,000 inhabitants in a two square mile area. This works out to “roughly 75,000 inhabitants per square mile or 117 per acre. As a comparison, in Chicago today there are 21 inhabitants per acre; San Francisco has 23, and New York City overall has 37” (Stark 1991:149). Manhattan has 100 per acre spread out vertically.

Most people lived in tiny cubicles as part of multi-storied tenements. Entire families were herded together into one room. For purposes which shall be very important in our discussion of the emergence of individualism in the modern era, the opportunity for any private moments in New Testament times “was rare” (Meeks 1983:29).

Due to the crowded conditions at home, it was natural for most people to seek relief in the public streets and facilities. An imaginary, yet engaging picture of a newcomer to Rome walking down a street in the middle of the afternoon is painted by Robert Banks in his little booklet *Going to Church in the First Century*:

I must say I found the narrow streets oppressive after being so long on the open road. Some of them were scarcely three meters wide. They were also muddy beyond description and quite insecure underfoot. Since work had already stopped for most, a fair number of people were already about, and at times we found it difficult to make our way. The streets wound so much, first this way, then that, that I soon lost whatever small sense of direction I had (1990:7).

In Paul’s day a majority of people lived in the country, a worldwide trend which would not be tipped in favor of city-living until the latter part of the twentieth century. However, it was in the city which provided the most fruitful ground for the emerging sect of Christianity to take root and grow into a worldwide movement.

Rodney Stark categorically states that “Christianity was an urban movement, and the New Testament was set down by urbanites” (1991:147). Paul himself “was a city person” and when he “rhetorically catalogs the places where he has suffered danger, he divides the world into city, wilderness, and sea (2Cor. 11:26)” (Meeks 1983:9).

Although Christianity was nurtured in the small rural communities around the Sea of Galilee, “within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement” (Meeks 1983:11). “Even without qualification, every competent historian has known that the Christian movement arose most rapidly in the Greco-Roman cities of Asian Minor, sustained by the very large communities of the Jewish diaspora” (Stark 1991:143).

The explosive growth of Christianity during the first century was aided in no small way by the wonderful network of roads which were built by the engineers and protected by the military. That expansion of the Christian faith “was closely associated with personal mobility, both physical and social The people of the Roman Empire traveled more extensively and more easily than had anyone before them—or would again until the nineteenth century” (Meeks 1983:17).

The roads provided flexibility in movement and became the conduit for the importation of a diversity of people into the increasingly cosmopolitan cities. An individual could exchange the narrow confines of the rural for the broad freedom of the urban. The prodigal son, who escaped his immediate family and went into “a distant country” (Luke 15:13) in order to imbibe in riotous living. This familiar story most likely reflects the changing moral fortunes of individuals both yesterday and today. As Claude Fischer affirms, the people who living in modern cities “are more likely than rural residents to behave in ways that diverge from the central and/or traditional norms of their common society” (1975:1321).

“MacMullen emphasizes the conservatism of villages, their ‘central characteristic.’ ‘They and their population hovered so barely above subsistence level that no one dared risk a change’” (Meeks 1983:15). Modern sociological research has affirmed that a breakup in a person’s social network often leads to a greater freedom for unconventional behavior:

“When people lack attachments, they have much greater freedom to deviate from the norms. In modern studies, unconventional behavior is strongly correlated with various measures of population turnover and instability. For example, where larger proportions of the U.S. and Canadian populations are newcomers or have recently moved from one residence to another, rates of participation in unconventional religious activities are high (Stark and Bainbridge 1985)” (Stark 1991:144).

Wayne Meeks, in his book *The First Urban Christians*, postulates that “such transitions and such dissonance may have been important in circles from which Pauline Christianity drew its members” (1983:21). This is because of the well known effect of change and increased receptivity to new relationships and ideas. This same circulation of people not only increased the

receptivity but the pluralism within the city. “The movements of peoples had brought many other cults to the city as well” (Meeks 1983:44). Like our own day, New Testament urbanism was teeming with a diversity of people and ideas:

Urban society in the early Roman Empire was scarcely less complicated than our own, in proportion to the scale of knowledge available to an individual and of demands made upon him. Its complexity—its untidiness to the mind—may well have been felt with special acuteness by people who were marginal or transient, either physically or socially or both, as so many of the identifiable members of the Pauline churches seem to have been (Meeks 1983:104).

With all these religions, the question needs to be raised just how Christianity emerged as a dominant movement within the Empire. Rodney Stark, along with others, has been a proponent of the marketing thesis in the rise of religions. “Typically the fate of new religious movements is largely beyond their control, depending greatly on features of the environment in which they appear” (1991:191). Although the freedom of movement and religious thought provided an open market for new religions to appear, “Christianity would have remained an obscure religious movement had the many firms making up Roman pluralism been vigorous” (Stark 1991:197).

The “excessive pluralism” (Stark 1991:197) within the Empire strained the personal and corporate resources to stage the lavish feasts which were used to attract and keep adherents:

Tertullian, Apology 39: “The Salii cannot have their feast without going into debt; you must get the accountants to tell you what the tenths of Hercules and the sacrificial banquets cost; the choicest cook is appointed for the Apaturia, the Dionysia, the Attic mysteries; the smoke from the banquet of Serapis will call out the firemen (1989 ed.) (Stark 1991:198).

It was out of this pluralism that Christianity grew, and not just from among the most marginalized classes of people. Celsus who was the first pagan author we know of who took Christianity seriously enough to write a book against it, “alleged that the church deliberately excluded educated people because the religion was attractive only to ‘the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children’ (Meeks 1983:51).

Paul’s letters do provide us with small clues of who might have been involved in the early Christian movement. It is clear that at least some of the believers had, “houses, slaves, the

ability to travel, and other signs of wealth. Some of the wealthy provided housing, meeting places, and other services for individual Christians and whole groups. In effect, they filled the role as patrons” (Meeks 1983:73). Robert Banks concurs that “a significant number of people in the church came from the more respected levels of society” (1998:116). Although the “extreme top and bottom” are missing, “a Pauline congregation generally reflected a fair cross-section of urban society” (Meeks 1983:73).

The observation that early Christianity only flourished among the poor and dispossessed is also countered by the study of modern sociology. “If the early church was like all the other cult movements for which good data exist, it was not a proletarian movement but was based on the more privileged classes” (Stark 1991:33). Stark argues from empirical study that religious skepticism often exists most strongly among the more privileged classes. Hence the early adopters of most cult movements are often drawn from the upper classes which then provide the financial and political resources necessary for that group to survive.

Robert Banks notes that as the Roman Empire expanded, the power became concentrated in a self-advancing minority.

Disenchantment with the polis not only took place among the politically disadvantaged sections of society but also increased among those, who in earlier days, had found their identity partly within it. To some extent the household community was the beneficiary of this exclusion from the real bodies where civil power resided. What people could not find in the wider community to which they belonged they sought in the smaller community in which they lived (1998:7).

It is to this reinvestment in the smaller, household communities that our attention now turns.

The Intimate Community

The Greek and Roman cultures had a number of voluntary societies which can be compared and contrasted with the community of believers which emerged in New Testament times. These societies tended to be “small groups in which intensive face-to-face interactions

were encouraged” (Meeks 1983:78). Membership was voluntary, rather than by birth and they shared in the practice of rituals, the eating of a common meal and other fraternal activities.

Unlike the voluntary associations which tended to be much more homogeneous, rich and poor, free and slave would associate together in the Christian households (Banks 1998:26). “Christian groups were much more inclusive in terms of social stratification” (Meeks 1983:79). Joining the Christian community meant a radical resocialization, where the sect was to become the primary group of its members, supplanting all other loyalties.

The New Testament communities both built upon past Jewish forms of community and transformed them. Although the meeting in private houses, the reading of Scriptures, prayers and exhortations were similar in the Synagogue, the Christian community sought to break down the strong ethnic boundaries, reject the role of circumcision and greatly elevate the role of women.

The household communities which were primarily created and nurtured by Paul were unique, interrelated entities which were founded on his understanding of the gospel:

“Christ’s radical words, ‘Who are my brethren?’ and ‘When two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst of them,’ lie behind Paul’s approach to community relations and assemblings. Christ’s sacrificial service stands as the model and motive for those who have special responsibilities in the community, including Paul himself. Christ’s resurrection power acts as a the source of the community’s unity and as the dynamic behind the gifts and ministries exercised within the community. Paul’s understanding of community is nothing less than the gospel itself!” (Banks 1998:190).

The gospel as taught by Paul and practiced in the community was not merely an individual affair based on personal beliefs. The gospel bound believers to God as well as to one another.

Acceptance by Christ necessitated acceptance of those whom he had already welcomed (Rom 15:7); reconciliation with God entailed reconciliation with others who exhibited the character of gospel preaching (Phil 4:2-3); union in the Spirit involved union with one another, for the Spirit was primarily a shared, not individual experience To embrace the gospel, then, is to enter into community” (Banks 1998:26-27).

Hence the New Testament stressed the Trinitarian nature of the gospel, the church and the community. The gospel story relates how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit focused all its heavenly resources in order to secure the salvation and restoration of a personally and corporately disjointed people on earth. Through God's own initiative, individuals were to be "called out" (ekklesia) of the world in order to form a new community which would transform both themselves and the world.

"This means that the ekklesia is not merely a human association, a gathering of like-minded individuals for a religious purpose, but is a divinely created affair" (Banks 1998:31). The commonest use of ekklesia referred to a town meeting of free male citizens of a Greek city. The term is used for the whole Christian movement (1Cor. 10:32); churches within a region (1Cor. 16:1; Gal. 1:2), local churches (1Thess. 1:1; Col. 4:16); and "for the smallest cell of the Christian movement, the household assembly" (Meeks 1983:108), (cf. Rom. 16:5, 19; Col. 4:15).

The primary importance of the term ekklesia is not to designate a building or purely institutional structures of administrative concerns. "Its chief importance lies in the way it stresses the centrality of meeting for community life: it is through gathering that the community comes into being and is continually recreated" (Banks 1998:46). The primary focus of the gathering was to restore and build a worshipping, wholistic community.

The intimacy of the household "was the basic context within which most if not all the local Pauline groups established themselves" (Meeks 1983:84). Due to its limited size "a moderately well-to-do household could hold around thirty people comfortably" (Banks 1998:35). Within this domestic space the Lord gathered a diversity of people from all across the Mediterranean area.

In an attempt to describe this community of believers and seekers, Paul used the metaphors of family (Gal. 6:10); adopted children (Gal. 4:4-5); heirs (Rom. 8:16-17); and members of the household of God (Eph. 2:18-19). "Adelphoi, 'brethren' is by far and away Paul's favorite way of referring to the members of the communities he is writing" (Banks 1998:50-51).

In addition, the church is pictured as a body, within which the Spirit gives a variety of gifts (1Cor. 12) in order to edify one another (Eph. 4:11-13) in love (1Cor. 13). Their relationship with one another therefore was internally generated through the fruits of the Spirit and externally manifested by the gifts of the Spirit. Through the Spirit, “those groups enjoyed an unusual degree of intimacy, high levels of interaction among members, and a very strong sense of internal cohesion and of distinction” (Meeks 1983:74).

The local groups of Christians which were spread and multiplied all across the Mediterranean not only enjoyed a high level of cohesion and group identity but were also continually made aware that they belonged to a larger movement. Meeks well summarizes this interrelatedness between the groups:

It is evident, too, that Paul and the other leaders of the mission worked actively to inculcate the notion of a universal brotherhood of the believers in Messiah Jesus. The letters themselves, the messengers who brought them, and the repeated visits to the local assemblies by Paul and his associates all emphasized interrelatedness. It is noteworthy that the places where the household assemblies are mentioned are all in the context of greetings in letter closings or (Philemon) openings. The smallest unit of the movement is addresses precisely in the epistolary context that remains the readers of the larger fellowship by mentioning names and groups and other places (1983:109).

Paul’s collection for the famished Jews in Palestine throughout the Gentile world of Asia Minor (1Cor. 16:1) further solidified these group’s status with the soil from which the Old Testament promises and the New Testament fulfillment had sprung.

The Witnessing Community

The new sect of Christianity which was emerging in the first century was conscious of both the boundaries which separated it from the world and its obligation to engage that world in witness and ministry. “Certainly a group that possesses information to which no one else has access is a group strongly conscious of the boundaries between itself and nonmembers” (Meeks 1983:92). However, the group did not withdraw like the Essenes in Qumran. “They remained in

the cities, and their members continued to go about their ordinary lives in the streets and neighborhoods, the shops and agora” (Meeks 1983:105).

Therefore the group’s internal life did not take place in complete isolation, but with an eye toward how they were to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Indeed, it has been posited that the rapid spread and strength of Christianity was not only dependent upon pure faith and doctrine but by the network of social interaction both inside and outside of the group. According to Adolf von Harnack, it was this strong social interaction between the people ‘and not any evangelist, which proved to be the most effective missionary’” (Meeks 1983:108).

Rodney Stark cites a source that lists 25 empirical studies on the effectiveness of social networks and conversion (1991:18). His own work in studying Moonies concluded that “conversion is not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one’s religious behavior into alignment with that of one’s friends and family members (1996:16-17). His study of Mormons showed the same tendency:

When [Mormon] missionaries make cold calls, knock on the doors of strangers, this eventually leads to a conversion once out of a thousand calls. However, when missionaries make their first contact with a person in the home of a Mormon friend or a relative of that person, this results in conversion 50 percent of the time (Stark and Bainbridge) (Stark 1996:18).

Therefore Stark concludes that: ‘social movements recruit primarily on the basis of interpersonal attachments that exist, or form, between the convert and members of the group” (1991:138). We have already seen that the multitude of household-centered groups which formed in the wake of Christian evangelism certainly had enough glue to stick both the new and more mature members together. But what provided the opportunity and basis for the addition of new members?

Rodney Stark posits that early Christianity was successful because it was powered by a new morality based on the teaching of Jesus to feed the hungry, be hospitable to the stranger, look after the sick and visit those in prison (Matt. 25:35-40).

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. . . .And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services (1991:161).

From our previous mention of the filth and human density of the cities in early Christianity, it is not difficult to conclude that epidemics were widespread and mortality was high. Nor is it hard to infer from the New Testament that the care for the sick, such as leprosy, was a low or non-existent priority for the culture as a whole. In this context, the miracles which Jesus performed to heal the sick were not only remarkable in how they were performed but who they were performed upon.

From the example and teaching of Jesus, the adherents to Christianity would have had a powerful example and motivation to take care of the sick, both inside and outside of the group. Rodney Stark makes a very pragmatic observation concerning the ratio of Christians to pagans which might have developed as a result of the epidemics severing people from their former attachments:

As mortality mounted during each of these epidemics, large numbers of people, especially pagans, would have lost the bonds that once might have restrained them from becoming Christians. Meanwhile, the superior rates of survival of Christian social networks would have provided pagans with a much greater probability of replacing their lost attachments with new ones to Christians (1991:75).

In the fourth century, the emperor Julian attempted to counteract the Christian charitable work by encouraging the pagan priests to match their benevolence. He wrote: “‘The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us’” (Stark 1991:84). But for all his urging, “‘there was little or no response because there were no doctrinal bases or traditional practices for them to build upon’” (Stark 1991:88).

It is significant to note that Stark is writing as a professor of sociology from the University of Washington, hardly a bastion of conservative Christian values. He chides his fellow professional academics who overlook the role of “doctrine” in the formation of Christian behavior by saying:

Social scientists typically are trained to be suspicious of ‘theological’ or ‘ideological’ explanations and often suppose that these are epiphenomena easily reduced to the ‘real’ causes, which are material in nature. This is true even of some social scientists who specialize in studies of early Christianity. However . . . ideas often are critical factors in determining not only individual behavior but, indeed, the path of history. To be more specific, for people in the Greco-Roman world, to be a Christian or a pagan was not simply a matter of ‘denominational preference.’ Rather, the contents of Christian and pagan beliefs were different in ways that greatly determined not only their explanatory capacities but also their relative capacities to mobilize human resources” (Stark 1991:79).

The role of doctrine as it relates to concrete action will be revisited when both individualism and pluralism of modern and post-modern eras are discussed. However, before Christendom emerged in the fourth century which led to wholesale nominalism, Christians were willing to endure very high costs, even martyrdom, in order to be faithful to their common faith and teaching.

Far from weakening the group, mortal pressure from the outside tended to “screen out free riders—those potential members whose commitment and participation would otherwise be low. The costs acts as a nonrefundable registration fees that, as in secular markets, measure seriousness or interest in the product. Only those willing to pay the price qualify” (Stark 1991:177). In short, the perceived value of both the Christian community and doctrine were so high that sacrifice was the norm instead of the exception in the New Testament church.

Summary

In this first chapter we have attempted to understand of the New Testament church through the disciplines of sociology and urban anthropology. To often in the past, “studies of

Pauline theology, which are legion, have all but universally neglected the social context and functions of doctrine” (Meeks 1983:164).¹

We found that the “church” (ekklesia) was comprised primarily of “small groups scattered in cities” which were both “intimate and exclusive” and actively engaged “with the larger urban society” (Meeks 1983:190). These cities were relatively small, filthy and tightly congested, linked by a network of roads which circulated a diversity of people and ideas. Private moments were rare.

Within this urban context, the Christian church was built through communities which were more intimate, homogeneous and missional than their secular and Jewish counterparts. In addition, the early Christian groups were linked together doctrinally through the teachings of Jesus and practically by the care of its members and the broader society. In particular, its teaching to care for the stranger and heal the sick provided a strong impetus for both the survival of its own members and the incorporation of others.

This strong linkage between the conceptual, the communal and the missional provide a model to measure and evaluate the disciple making efforts of the church in history. The next chapter briefly looks at how the New Testament model of the Church was affected by two thousand years of church history.

¹ This is because theological study has at times been overly influenced by the modern scientific worldview which attempted to distill truth apart from the environment from which it was produced.

