



The Great Commission: Discipleship and Followership

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Arguably the most influential individual to walk the face of this earth was Jesus of Nazareth. Born over two thousand years ago, the religion of his namesake, Christianity, currently boasts over 2 billion adherents, encapsulating one-third of the world's population.¹ Some of the most socially, culturally, and behaviourally influential teachings in history are attributed to the individual we know as Jesus Christ.

When one considers the term *influential*, the concept of leadership comes to mind. For example, Bass² argues *idealized influence* is one of the four behaviours of transformational leaders (along with individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation). Yet, Jesus did not espouse leadership the way we envision, instructing “...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44, NIV). This appears to be significantly different from our current concept of the influential, take-charge leader.

This paper posits the concept of active followership is most applicable with Jesus' doctrine. Through the lens of followership, this paper proposes a practical guide to assist current congregations in fulfilling the biblical mandate commonly known as The Great Commission. This guide lays out a road map for attracting and assimilating new members, or active followers, into the local church, thus fulfilling the mandate in Matthew 28.

Followership

Followership is defined as “the willingness to cooperate in working towards the accomplishment of the group mission, to demonstrate a high degree of teamwork, and to build cohesion among the group.”³ Kelley describes followers based upon two intersecting dimensions, namely (a) *Independent/critical thinking*, the ability

to “think for themselves, give constructive criticism, are their own person, and are innovative and creative” (p. 93), and (b) *Active engagement*, the propensity to “take initiative, assume ownership, participate actively, are self-starters, and go above and beyond the job.”⁴ Based upon Kelley’s model, one searches for the Exemplary, or “star” follower, who “think for themselves, are very active, and have very positive energy.”⁵ Chaleff’s⁶ work utilized this baseline but went further, addressing what it takes to be a courageous follower. Courage refers to the ability to be brave, implying risk. A courageous follower is described as practicing five key dimensions, the courage to (a) assume responsibility, (b) serve, (c) challenge, (d) participate in transformation, and (e) take moral action.⁷

Given this foundation, whether called exemplary or courageous, the active follower serves as a disciple of Christ fulfilling what is known as the Great Commission.

The Great Commission

In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus instructs His disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (NIV). This biblical mandate, known commonly as the Great Commission, instructs Christians to move outward and make disciples, teaching them in faith, and initiating them into fellowship.

Of importance here is the use of the term disciple. Merriam Webster defines a disciple as “one who accepts and assists in spreading the doctrines of another.”⁷ Further, Willard refers to a disciple as an apprentice, “someone who has decided to be with another person, under appropriate conditions, in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is.”⁸ With respect to being a disciple of Jesus, Willard noted “as a disciple...I am with him, by choice and by grace, learning from him how to live in the kingdom of God.”⁹

In the Commission, the main verb, meaning “to make disciples,” is critical to understanding the language of the commission itself.¹⁰ It is “much more than simply ‘to proclaim.’”¹¹ “It does not mean to present or offer only a message, but rather to lead to a close personal relationship, modelled on the relationship between the earthly Jesus and his own disciples.”¹² Smith argues the verb means “to turn converts and confessors of Jesus from among Jews and Gentiles into disciples, people walking the way of righteousness, trees bearing good fruit, guests wearing a wedding garment.”¹³ Thus, according to Matthew, it is a “catechetical mission, evangelism through Christian education....of each generation, learning the way of the Kingdom at each state of life and through all human experiences.”¹⁴

Additionally, Matthey adds “the condition of ‘disciple’ is not a specific, past condition of that group of people following Jesus in the first century, but describes the status of any Christian....What Jesus tells his disciples he tells us.”¹⁵ Herrero echoes this point, noting:

The eleven, in order to carry out their received mission must go to all humankind. They cannot remain at home, waiting with folded arms for people to come to them; they must set out on a journey (going) and, modelling themselves on the itinerant style of Jesus, go to all people everywhere...taking into account the geographical reference (all peoples) and the following reference to time (to the end of the age), the conclusion is clear that this mission is now the responsibility...of all future collaborators and successors, that is to say all Christians.”¹⁶

Arias argues “the ‘Great Commission’ is a warning to those churches that are not doing well in their Christian education program, or in their biblical preaching and teaching, fostering generations of Bible illiterates.”¹⁷ He continues “The temptation is to water down the demands of the gospel preaching from a comfortable pulpit, to a comfortable pew.”¹⁸ Of importance here is the terminology used; note the use of the word *church*, not pastor or preacher, as well as Arias’ temptation relating to merely preaching from the pulpit. The mandate is addressed to the entire church, leaders and followers alike, calling all to disciple, calling all to be active followers.

CITE

Specifically related to the Matthean Gospel, Matthey argues the use of the term *disciple* “has important consequences for the interpretation of his whole book....For us, today, it tells us who we are as Christians and what our calling is.”¹⁹ With respect to this still “current” call for each of us to become disciples of Christ, Pastor Dillon Staas developed the CITE model for discipleship in the local church. Staas notes the CITE model “lays out a strategy for attracting and assimilating new members.”²⁰ According to Staas, the CITE acronym stands for Contact, Involve, Teach, and Empower.

Contact

All Christians know someone who is not part of the church. The Contact function requires “knowing the church status of your friends, family, co-workers, neighbours, etc. and inviting the un-churched to visit your local church.”^{xx} The subsequent invitation may be to a worship service, church meal, or other ministry event where the invitee has the opportunity to meet the people of your church. Persistence may be required

here, such that multiple invites may be required. This opportunity to meet members of the church family allows the invitee to make a determination with respect to their own fit within the church population (i.e. people-organization fit).

Involve

Pastor Staas states “Involving them happens once they visit. There are many ‘points of entry’ into the church. The key to developing new followers is to find their point of interest and plug it into a ministry area of the church.”^{xx} For example, many churches promote discipleship through programs such as youth and adult educational ministry, musical ministry programs, and mission work both locally and abroad. “This is finding the people-job fit. Every involvement means building new relationships with people in the church. Studies have shown that it is personal relationships that keep a new attendee coming back to a church.”^{xx}

Teach

“Teaching is where we move [someone] from being a part of a social group to being a follower of Jesus Christ.”^{xx} The teaching function with respect to the CITE model comes right from the mouth of Jesus himself in Matthew 28:19-20. Of importance here is acknowledging that someone can be a part of the church without being a true follower of Christ. We, as Christians, can help facilitate that relationship through teaching.

Empower

Pastor Staas is quite adamant about the final step of his CITE model, that being empowering new followers:

If you attract new followers and involve them in the life of your church, and if you have taught them the faith so they are well prepared to be in ministry themselves, then you must also empower them. Most followers want significant work to do. They want to feel useful, like they have made an important contribution to the cause they are following. If you fail to empower your followers their interest will wane. This last step is easy to overlook, but it must be implemented. Followers have a right to some stake in the cause.

CITE as Followership

As Willard notes, Jesus “was specifically training individuals to carry on his work of ministry.”²¹ Although Willard argues “The main burden of this work of disciple making no doubt falls to those of us who teach and lead, in whatever capacity, in our churches and our society,”²² Jesus selected the likes of fisherman and tax collectors, not the teachers of the Law, to be His first disciples. We are aware of many great Christian leaders, but it is each of us who are called to “go” in the Great Commission. It is the active follower, the one

Chaleff²³ describes as having the ability to assume responsibility, serve, and participate who courageously contacted and involved would-be Christians for over two thousand years. One must acknowledge that for the Christian church to be where it is today, complete reliance on the initial eleven disciples, the seventy-two additional disciples (Luke 10:1), or even individual church pastors and elders was never Jesus' plan. The Great Commission calls each of us to discipleship, or as purported here, active followership, to "the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

Concluding Thoughts

In the Great Commission, Jesus instructs His disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV). "The purely verbal confession of Jesus as heavenly lord is not enough for Christian preacher or for the hearer."²⁴ All Christians, whether pastor or parishioner, leader or follower, are called to discipleship by Jesus through the voice of Matthew. Although not the easiest of callings for many, the CITE model (Contact, Involve, Teach, Empower) proposed by Pastor Dillon Staas offers a framework to assist Christians in discipleship as called for in the Great Commission.

About the Author

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¹ World Christian Database: Center for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. <http://worldchristiandatabase.org.eres.regent.edu:2048/wcd/> (accessed July 17, 2006).

² B.M. Bass. *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. New Yorker: Free Press, 1985.

³ Union.uiuc.edu. *Followership*. http://www.union.uiuc.edu/involvement/rso/leader_readers/followership.pdf (accessed Retrieved September 14, 2008).

⁴ Robert Kelley. *The power of followership*. (New York: Bantam Doubleday Currency, 1992) 94.

⁵ Robert Kelley. "Rethinking Followership." In *The Art of Followership*, ed. Ronald Riggio, Ira Chaleff, and Jean Lipman-Blumen. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008). 8.

⁶ Ira Chaleff. *The courageous follower: Standing up to & for our leaders*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1995.

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- ⁷ Disciple. (2008). In *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*.
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disciple> (accessed November 16, 2008).
- ⁸ Dallas Willard. *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. (San Francisco: Harper, 1997.) 282.
- ⁹ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 283.
- ¹⁰ Mary Hinkle Shore. (2006). "Preaching mission: Call and promise in Matthew 28:16-20," *Word & World* 26, no. 3, (2006): 322-328.
- ¹¹ Francisco Perez Herrero. (2006). "Mission following the missionary mandate of the risen Christ," *International Review of Mission* 95, no. 378/379 (2006): 308.
- ¹² Herrero, "Mission following the missionary mandate of the risen Christ," 308.
- ¹³ R. Smith. (1993). "Matthew 28:16-20, anticlimax or key to the Gospel?," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 32, no. 595 (1993): 595.
- ¹⁴ Mortimer Arias. (1991). "Church in the world: Rethinking the Great Commission," *Theology Today* 47, no. 4, 410-418 (1991): 412.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Matthey. (1980). "The Great Commission according to Matthew," *International Review of Mission* 69, no. 274 (1980): 162
- ¹⁶ Herrero, "Mission following the missionary mandate of the risen Christ," 309.
- ¹⁷ Arias, "Church in the world: Rethinking the Great Commission," 412.
- ¹⁸ Arias, "Church in the world: Rethinking the Great Commission," 413.
- ¹⁹ Matthey, "The Great Commission according to Matthew," 162.
- ²⁰ Dillon Staas, "CITE model," email message to author, October 28, 2008.
- ²¹ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 290.
- ²² Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 310.
- ²³ Chaleff, *The courageous follower: Standing up to & for our leaders*.
- ²⁴ Herrero, "Mission following the missionary mandate of the risen Christ," 310.