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Why have I written this book? What were the seeds that germinated this plant? It began with my passion for the Great Commission, specifically Matthew 28:19–20 where Jesus says to the Twelve, “Make disciples!” This is Jesus’s marching orders for his church. Most would agree that this is one passage of several that addresses the mission of the church. But what does it mean? To take seriously and obey Christ’s command to make disciples, we must understand what it means or we’re flying in the dark. Churches that don’t understand Matthew’s version of Jesus’s Great Commission are much like an oceangoing vessel that is plowing through fog-enshrouded, iceberg-infested waters without navigation equipment.

For much of my life as a Christian, I have either attended or pastored what is known in some areas of the country as a Bible church. And most traditional Bible churches have interpreted Matthew 28:19–20 to mean that the church’s mission is to teach the Bible—to make disciples simply means to teach people the Bible. I was told, “If you preach and teach the Bible, everything else will fall into place.” But this has not proved true.

So what does the Great Commission mean? The real problem in the Matthew passage is the term disciple. What is a disciple? Ask most Christians who regularly attend a church, or even a class of seminary students who are preparing to be pastors, and you’ll get a variety of answers. By the way, how would you answer the question?

While my passion for Jesus’s Great Commission motivated the writing of this work, God used a recent experience to urge me to do it now. One of my fellow faculty members at Dallas Seminary who teaches a class on biblical discipleship was out of town. Rather than cancel the class, he invited two other people and me, knowing of my interest in the topic, to address his class. One of the other speakers was a young man who was involved in discipling several
committed men in his church. The other was a local pastor’s wife who had a passion for discipling some of the women in her church.

I was excited about the opportunity and presented first. The content consisted mostly of the material in this book, shoehorned into a five-minute presentation. When I sat down, I noticed that the man and woman were not smiling and both were staring at the floor to avoid eye contact with me. After I heard their presentations, I understood why. Our views of discipleship were polar opposites.

A Quiz

Before you read any further, take the following quiz and see how you do. Determine whether the following six statements are true or false.

1. The only way to disciple a person is for a gifted, mature Christian to work one-on-one with a believer who desires to grow in Christ.
2. A disciple is a Christian, but a Christian may not be a disciple.
3. Discipleship is only one of several key ministries in the church.
4. The church should focus primarily on discipling those who are serious about Christianity.
5. Discipleship involves the edification of the saints not the evangelism of sinners.
6. Discipleship is best accomplished by a few in the church who are trained to disciple those who are serious about their commitment to Christ.

The answer to all the above questions is false.

So how did you do? Have I piqued your curiosity? Have I upset you? Perhaps you’re shaking your head in disagreement. Or maybe you’re nodding your head in agreement. Regardless of your response, read on!

The Question

Whether or not you concur with my answers to the quiz, I’m sure you would agree that every church should have a simple, clear pathway for making authentic disciples. So the question is, Does your church have such a strategy in place? Does it have a game plan for making disciples? If a new Christian visited your church and asked you or someone in the church how you would help him or her to grow as one of Christ’s disciples, what would your answer be? What would be the first step? And what would be the second? My experience is that most churches either wouldn’t have an answer or wouldn’t have a clear answer, because most church leaders simply aren’t thinking that way. I’m convinced, however, that such a response can change so that our churches have a biblical, Christ-honoring answer and thus have a greater impact in the twenty-first century.
**Introduction**

**This Book Is for You!**

I wrote this book for anyone in Christ’s church who takes seriously Christ’s Great Commission to make disciples. This would include senior pastors, pastors of small churches, executive pastors, other church staff, governing boards, congregants, consultants, professors, and denominational executives. I believe that all are responsible for being a part of the discipleship process if a church is going to obey the Savior. The church’s success depends on those who own and implement Jesus’s mission for our church.

**Where Am I Going?**

I have divided this book into two parts. Part 1 *prepares* the reader for making mature disciples and prepares the way for part 2. Part 1 addresses the church’s disciple-making mission, the current state of church discipleship, and the definitions of *disciple* and *discipleship*; it asks who is responsible for making disciples in the church; it presents Jesus’s message and methods for making disciples; and it covers the church’s message and methods for making disciples in the first century. Part 2 *presents* the process for making mature disciples. Using a tool I call the Maturity Matrix, it addresses the characteristics of a mature disciple, the ministries for making disciples, how to measure the church’s disciple-making efforts, and how to use the Maturity Matrix to recruit staff and develop the budget.

**The Value of the Maturity Matrix**

There are five ways that the matrix will have value for you and your church.

1. Most importantly, it will guide you as you design a simple, clear strategy, process, or pathway for developing authentic disciples in your church.
2. It will help you understand your current process for making or attempting to make disciples.
3. It will enable you to analyze, critique, and recritique your process. What are its strengths and weaknesses? What is sound and what needs to be shored up?
4. It will assist you in developing your disciple-making process. You will address the question: Now that we have critiqued our process, how can we as a church improve our disciple making?
5. It will enable you to understand other churches’ disciple-making processes. You can place what they are doing on the matrix, and it will help you analyze and comprehend their processes. Often an understanding of other processes will aid you in improving your own process.
The Context

One of the first principles of good Bible study is to interpret a biblical passage in its context. This principle teaches that context is important. That is true for any topic, including this book. So what’s the context for this book? It is strategic envisioning (planning). I argue that the way a church makes disciples is vital to how it does strategic planning. I wrote *Advanced Strategic Planning* to help churches in general and their leaders in particular think and act strategically. This does not involve mimicking some church model, which seldom works, but working one’s way through Christ’s church-building process (see Matt. 16:18), which consists of touching four bases.

The first base is to discover the ministry’s core values so that it knows why it does what it does or does not do what it should do (such as make disciples). Core values get at the church’s DNA or core identity. The second and third bases are the church’s mission and vision, both of which help the church discover and articulate its direction—making mature disciples. The last base is the church’s strategy, which enables it to accomplish its mission and vision. It is made up of five key elements.

1. The church’s *strategy for discovering its community*—its future disciples.
2. The church’s *strategy for making and maturing disciples*. Once the church knows who makes up its community, it must determine what it plans to do for that community. The answer is to design a strategic process—detailed in this book—to help the people become disciples or believers and, in time, mature disciples.
3. The church’s *team strategy*, which asks, Who is the disciple-making team?
4. The *strategy for its location and facilities*, which asks, Where can we best make disciples?
5. A *stewardship strategy*, which addresses how the church will raise the funds necessary for the disciple-making process.

Further Help

Finally, there are questions at the end of each chapter. They are designed to help you reflect on the chapter’s contents. I encourage you to read this book with others in your church and use these questions to provoke discussion about your church and how it makes disciples. If you are a pastor, I encourage you to read this book with your board and/or staff.
Part 1

The Preparation for Making Mature Disciples

The purpose of this book is to help you and your church obey Jesus’s command in Matthew 28:19 to make disciples. We will better accomplish this if we clearly understand what the Bible teaches about disciples and how to make them. This part of the book will address a number of introductory issues, such as the church’s biblical mission, how well churches are accomplishing this mission, and the definitions of disciple and disciple making. The main thrust of this part is to address Jesus’s message and methods for making disciples, found in the Gospels, and the church’s message and methods, found in the book of Acts and in the Epistles. We want to discover the similarities and differences in the messages and methods that were used.
What Are We Supposed to Be Doing?

The Church’s Mission

The question in the title of this chapter points us to the biblical mission of Christ’s church on earth. Before I address this question, however, I believe it is important to first address what churches are doing.

What Are We Doing?

Perhaps the most important questions that the church and its leadership can ask are, What does God want us to do? What is our mission? What are our marching orders? The answers are not hard to find. More than two thousand years ago, the Savior predetermined the church’s mission. It’s the Great Commission, as found in such texts as Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21; and Acts 1:8.

The Great Commission Passages

 Matthew 28:19–20
 Mark 16:15
 Luke 24:46–49
 John 20:21
 Acts 1:8
As I consult with churches and research churches from border to border and coast to coast, I find that most are not following Christ’s command in Matthew 28:19–20 to make disciples. While all churches have a mission, the mission is not necessarily Christ’s mission.

I used to tell churches without a Great Commission mission that they do not have a mission and need to develop one. I have since changed my mind. Every church has a set of core values, and those values drive the church toward and cause it to establish its mission. For example, the church may have a strong Bible teaching ministry because it values the Scriptures highly. Thus its sole mission, whether held at a conscious or, more likely, an unconscious level, is to communicate the Scriptures. Though this is a worthy endeavor, it is not the church’s Great Commission mission. Below I discuss several missions of the church that have developed because of the specific value or values of individual churches.

Caring for People

My experience is that the majority of smaller churches in North America, especially those populated mainly by the Builder generation, believe the church’s sole mission and the primary role of the pastor is to take care of its people. This is true especially of those living in more rural areas of the country. This hands-on care involves such services as home and hospital visitation as well as crisis counseling. Should a new, inexperienced pastor not be aware of these expectations and fail to visit Grandma or Grandpa in the hospital, he will discover that he has likely offended not only Grandma or Grandpa but the entire family. Should he not correct this major faux pas, many in the congregation will assume he doesn’t like them and wonder what is wrong with him and why he is in ministry.

Where did the Builder generation get this idea? There are two sources. One is a misunderstanding of the biblical use of the shepherd imagery. Many assume that in the first century shepherds mostly took care of sheep. While shepherds did take care of sheep, they did much more than that. They were more than pastoral caregivers, they were pastoral leaders as well. In addition to this misunderstanding, in the 1600s the Puritans stressed that the pastor is a “physician of the soul.” Specifically they stressed the importance that he be a pastoral caregiver more than a congregational leader. (For more on pastoral care and the role of the pastor, see appendix A.)

Teaching the Bible

Often an unstated mission of churches, especially those in the Bible church movement (my roots), is to teach people the Bible. In these churches, the primary expectation of the pastor is to teach the Bible well and with some depth. Thus he may spend all week in the study, preparing for Sunday’s sermon. I find
that many evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges hold this view concerning the mission of the church. In a church with this mission, if the pastor is not a good Bible teacher or places the emphasis somewhere else, he may not be around for very long. People will become dissatisfied and wonder why he isn’t teaching the Bible.

Where did this view come from? While the mission of caring for people came down to us from the Puritan tradition, this view came down as a part of the tradition of the Reformers. During the Reformation, the Reformers emphasized the teaching of the Scriptures. Prior to this time in church history, the Roman Catholic Church taught little Bible from the pulpit and even discouraged doing it.

**Evangelizing Lost People**

An unstated mission in some churches is to win lost people to faith in Christ. This used to be the predominant mission of many churches in the first half of the twentieth century, especially Baptist churches. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, I have detected a move away from this mission. Few churches seem to value evangelism, and not much of it is taking place as it was earlier. In fact, evangelism seems to be a dying value in far too many churches in the twenty-first century. While evangelism isn’t the church’s sole mission, it is a part of its mission.

**Worshiping God**

Some churches believe that their mission is to worship God. They have caught the importance of worship and emphasize it above all else. Often this is the case in classical and liturgical churches, and they reflect this emphasis in the mission statement. However, I would argue from a theological perspective that the church’s worship of God is one of five functions of the church (worship, fellowship, biblical instruction, evangelism, and service) that come under the church’s mission. But worship is not the church’s sole mission.

**Ministering to Families**

I am aware of at least one church that believes its mission is to help parents minister to their family. The pastor and the church highly value family. It is the church’s overarching primary value that influences its other values and all its ministries. People go to this church because of the help it provides in growing strong, biblically focused families. While no one would object to this as a core value in the church, we must object to its being the mission of the church. Again, the church’s overall mission is to make disciples, not only to focus on and help its families. I would argue that ministering to families is
a part of discipleship, but this involves more than just ministering to adults and their children.

### Church Missions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Driving Values</th>
<th>Resulting Missions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pastoral Care</td>
<td>Caring for people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>Teaching the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evangelism</td>
<td>Evangelizing lost people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship</td>
<td>Worshipping God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Ministering to families</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### What Are We Supposed to Be Doing?

The sampling of wrong missions above helps us better understand that the church’s true mission is the Great Commission. You may wonder how I know this and what the Great Commission really is. My hope is that, as we look closely at Matthew 28:19–20, this will become clear.

#### The Church’s Mission

Most scholars would agree that the church’s mission is the Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21; and Acts 1:8. It makes sense that as Jesus prepared to leave this earth, he provided his disciples (the apostles) with their life’s mission. And his last words are lasting words. Several times I have come across Christians who have argued that the Great Commission was given solely to the disciples, not to the church. Thus, they say, it is not the church’s commission but only the disciples’ commission. This is a poor argument. The book of Acts makes it very clear that the disciples took on the primary leadership role in the early church as apostles (they are called apostles only in Acts to emphasize their new role). And their mission, in turn, becomes the church’s mission. While they were apostles, they were still disciples as well and represented all Christ’s disciples. Thus what he gave to them as his disciples, he gives to all his disciples.

#### Understanding the Great Commission

What exactly is the Great Commission? To answer this question, I have placed the Great Commission passages in the chart below, identifying each passage in the first column. The subsequent columns indicate those to whom the Savior addressed the message, what he said (the essence of the commission), those to whom the commission was given, how they were to do what
What Are We Supposed to Be Doing?

Christ commanded them, and where it was to take place. I’ve not included John 20:21 here because it addresses only the sending of the disciples.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>To Whom</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Where</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Matthew 28:19–20</td>
<td>Disciples</td>
<td>“Go and make disciples.”</td>
<td>All nations</td>
<td>Baptizing and teaching</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 16:15</td>
<td>Disciples</td>
<td>“Go . . . and preach the good news.”</td>
<td>All creation</td>
<td></td>
<td>All the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acts 1:8</td>
<td>Disciples</td>
<td>“Be my witnesses.”</td>
<td>With power</td>
<td></td>
<td>Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the whole earth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We can make seven observations about the Great Commission:

1. Each passage is addressed to the disciples as the future apostles and leaders of the church.
2. All the passages are imperatives that spell out Christ’s mandate for his church.
3. All the verses emphasize evangelism: “Be witnesses,” “Preach the good news,” and so on.
4. Both Matthew 28:19–20 and Mark 16:15 command the disciples to go, not retreat. Thus the Great Commission is a proactive not a passive venture. Whereas far too many North American churches are waiting for people to come to them (their ministries are “atractional” or invitational, not missional or incarnational), the Great Commission commands that we go to the people.
5. They were to go to “all nations,” not just Israel. In the Great Commission, Christ has included both Israel and the Gentiles.
6. Putting the verses together, we find that the church is to preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins and then baptize and teach those who respond. And this is to be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.
7. There are to be no geographical limitations. The whole world is the church’s mission field. And Acts 1:8 would seem to have geographical and ethnological implications. Each church is to reach out to its Jerusalem, its Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. They are to disciple those in each church’s community as well as on the international mission field. Note that Christ included the Samaritans, who were not
Jews. The implication is that we are to go to those who are ethnically different from us.

**Understanding Matthew 28:19–20**

Some people question whether Matthew 28:19–20 clearly teaches that the church is to do evangelism. Matthew teaches this, but perhaps it is not clear to the twenty-first-century reader. The problem and question here is, What did Jesus mean when he commanded his church to make disciples? Is this passage talking about evangelism, or is it talking about growing believers up in their faith, or could it be both?

Should you ask ten different people in the church (including the pastoral staff) what a disciple is, you might get ten different answers. The same is true at a seminary. If the church is not clear on what Jesus meant, then it will be difficult to comply with his expressed will. For the church to understand what the Savior meant in Matthew 28:19–20, we must examine the main imperative: “make disciples.” What did Jesus mean?

A common view is that a disciple is a committed believer. Thus a disciple is a believer, but a believer isn’t necessarily a disciple. But that’s not how the New Testament uses this term. I contend that the normative use of the term *disciple* is for one who is a convert to or a believer in Jesus Christ (there are a few exceptions to this—“the disciples of Moses” in John 9:28 and the “disciples” of the Pharisees in Matt. 22:16, for example). Thus the Bible teaches that a disciple is not necessarily a Christian who has made a deeper commitment to the Savior but simply a Christian. Committed Christians are committed disciples. Uncommitted Christians are uncommitted disciples. This is clearly how Luke uses the term *disciple* in the book of Acts and his Gospel. It is evident in passages such as the following: Acts 6:1–2, 7; 9:1, 26; 11:26; 14:21–22; 15:10; 18:23; 19:9. A great example is Acts 14:21, where Luke says they made “disciples” in connection with evangelism. Here they preached the gospel and won or made a large number of disciples or converts, not mature or even growing Christians. Disciples, then, were synonymous with believers. Virtually all scholars acknowledge this to be the case in Acts.

However, we must not stop here. Much of Jesus’s teaching of the Twelve (who are believers, except for Judas) concerns the need for the disciple to grow in Christ (see Matt. 16:24–26 and Luke 9:23–25). For example, Matthew 16:24 says, “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

So how does this relate to the passages in Acts and the other commission passages in the Gospels? The answer is that the Great Commission has both an evangelism and an edification or spiritual growth component. To make a disciple, first one has to win a person (a nondisciple) to Christ. At that point he or she becomes a disciple. It doesn’t stop there. Now the new disciple needs
What Are We Supposed to Be Doing?

to grow or mature as a disciple, hence the edification component. While the other Great Commission texts stress evangelism (see my observations above), I believe that the command to “make disciples” in Matthew 28:19 stresses both concepts—evangelism and edification. (There is a more in-depth study of what Jesus meant in Matthew 28:19–20 in appendix B for the reader who wants more detail.)

Jesus was clear about his intentions for his church. It wasn’t just to teach or preach the Word, as important as that is. Nor was it evangelism alone, although this is emphasized as much as teaching. He expects his entire church (not simply a few passionate disciple makers) to move people along a maturity or disciple-making continuum from prebirth (unbelief) to the new birth (belief) and then to maturity.

Disciple-Making Continuum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nondisciple</th>
<th>New Disciple</th>
<th>Growing Disciple</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prebirth (unbelief)</td>
<td>New birth (belief)</td>
<td>Maturity (growth)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In fact, this is so important that we can measure a church’s spiritual health and its ultimate success by its obedience to the Great Commission. Therefore, it is fair to ask of every church’s ministry how many people have become disciples (believers) and how many of these disciples are growing toward maturity. In short, it’s imperative that every church make and mature disciples at home and abroad!

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Does your church have a mission statement? If so, what is it? Does it consist of the Great Commission?
2. If your church doesn’t have a mission statement, it still has a mission. Based on its values and what people seem to emphasize and value most, what might that mission be? Is it the Great Commission? If not, is it one of the missions addressed in this chapter, such as to take care of people, and so on?
3. Do you agree that the church’s mission is the Great Commission? Why or why not? If it is not the Great Commission, then what is it?
4. What is the Great Commission? How would you define a disciple? Do you agree or disagree with the author’s definition? What do you think Jesus meant when he said “make disciples”?