

Sermon: "The Disciple-Making Church"

Text: I Thessalonians 1:1-10.

Sermon Outline.

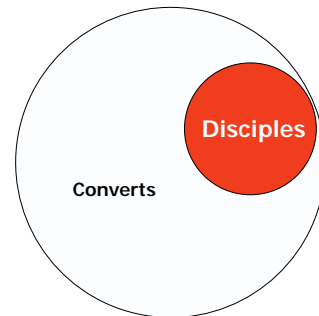
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Introduction ~ This morning, in these next few moments, we want to unpack two significant questions: "What is the difference between merely being a Christian and being a disciple?"

And second, "What is a Disciple-Making Church?" It's my conviction our American churches have come up with mistaken, unbiblical answers to both these questions. We're simplifying, streamlining and dumbing down almost everything. You see, apparently we want to make converts, not disciples of Jesus.

The two are not the same. Here's diagram, a Venn diagram, to sketch out what I'm describing.

In terms of this diagram, clearly you can be a convert without being a disciple – is this majority position here in American churches? ... But you cannot be a disciple without being a convert.



I'm convinced the riskiest, yet most rewarding adventure you can ever experience is becoming and being a *disciple of Jesus*.

Are you sitting there thinking, "Hey, I'm already a Christian"?

There's a vast difference between being a Christian and being a *disciple* of Jesus. Many people consider themselves Christians simply because they believe in Jesus Christ. Believing in Jesus Christ will make you a convert but not necessarily a disciple, get you into that red zone on the screen...

The difference between a convert and a disciple is the same difference between giving birth and raising your child.

A woman was in the hospital giving birth to her first baby. As the pain and contractions increased, she grabbed her nurse, pulled her close and screamed, "Is the hard part over?!"

The nurse smiled and said, "*Honey, this is the easy part. The hard part is the next eighteen years!*"

It can be easy to become a Christian. You need simply to accept Jesus Christ and ask Him to come into your life, your heart. A person is saved by God's grace, not by anything you can do to save yourself.

The hard part is becoming and being a disciple of Jesus who lives a life of personal obedience to Jesus.

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When Paul, Silas and Timothy planted churches, they went for disciples, not just converts. They were passionate disciple-makers. They planted disciple-making churches. And their disciple-making churches changed their world and turned the Roman empire upside-down. They were not satisfied or content with seekers, adherents, sympathizers, admirers, attenders, mere converts.

. They were all about making disciples, just like Jesus.

We're beginning a sermon series on I Thessalonians, Paul's First Letter to the Church in Thessalonika. Written about 50 AD, this letter might well be the earliest Christian document in Western civilization.

Luke wrote the Book of Acts a few years after Paul, Silas and Timothy planted this church. You can read the factual account in Acts 17. The story of the planting of the Church at Thessalonika is the story of what happens when everything goes right. Paul and his team were able quickly to plant a vibrant and healthy church. Composed of both Jews and Gentiles, this church became a powerful instrument for evangelizing their entire region. ...So you can examine the Church at Thessalonika to discover the basics of what a church, any given church, is supposed to be like... and this focus on disciple-making is the key.

When I was studying up at Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, the faculty members up there thought it important that we hear Anglican Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda. A gifted evangelist with an amazing personal story, Kivengere miraculously escaped Idi Amin in Uganda when many of his brother pastors were butchered, martyred by Amin. What a preview that was of things to come! Anyway, Bishop Festo went home in 1988... he died of leukemia.

In a Seminary chapel service there in Arden Hills, Minnesota, Bishop Festo sketched out some significant differences he noticed between the churches in Africa and the churches here in the States... a number of significant differences.

Kivengere said the churches in Africa are intent on making disciples, not converts... and he went on to explain the difference by describing how they decided to handle baptism.

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Some Anglican pastors in Uganda instituted a local rule in their churches. Once you become a Christian, they said, baptism is not automatic for you. You, the new believer, must win one other person to Christ before you can be baptized. Win somebody else to Christ, and then you may experience the privilege of Christian baptism. In other words, you must first demonstrate you are a serious disciple of Jesus before you can be baptized. Disciples with proof can be baptized. That was their approach. ... Now, if you tried to adopt that ground-rule here in America, all the good-church going folk would threaten their preacher with a rope and the nearest tree...

But here's the fascinating sidelight: this ground-rule occurred in Africa at the same time revival broke out in that region. Was the revival a contributing cause or a resulting effect of the rule? One thing is certain: there was revival in Africa in those years when that ground-rule was in place.

When Paul, Silas and Timothy planted churches during what we call, "the Second Missionary Journey of Paul the Apostle," they had a carefully defined goal:

α In each locality, to plant a church able to sustain and reproduce itself... in other words, a disciple-making church.

Just what is a disciple-making church all about? The take-home idea from our text is this:

. God wants each church to become a disciple-making church. God wants us to aim higher and deeper than we aim. God wants us – God wants our church to become a disciple-making church.

. In our text, there are three identifying marks of a disciple-making church.

I. The first identifying mark of a disciple-making church is the primary goal: making a disciple of each individual.

A. Paul, Silas and Timothy were not satisfied with making converts; their purpose was to make disciples.

Over these past weeks, I've shared with you "the Three Priorities" as the foundational description of what discipleship to Jesus is all about. The real disciple of Jesus lives out three basic priorities in his or her life.

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1. The first priority is a growing commitment to Jesus Christ.
2. The second priority is a growing commitment to the Body of Christ, your face-to-face group of disciples.
3. The third priority is a growing commitment to the work of Christ in your world.

Yes, there is a sense in which these Three Priorities are a sequence; but it's also true that each disciple needs to grow in all three simultaneously. You need movement in all three to get healthy and stay healthy as a disciple of Jesus.

You can visualize discipleship as a basic spiral, touching each of these commitments. The authentic disciple of Jesus grows and keeps on growing in each of these fundamental dimensions of discipleship to Jesus.

You find these Three Priorities clearly exhibited by the church in Thessalonika. No doubt about it... a group of people who live out these Three Priorities by the power of the Holy Spirit will easily face down and overcome the experience of persecution!

The disciple-making church operates with a specific definition of discipleship to Jesus. Are the churches of America "dumbing down" our definition of discipleship? And aren't we getting what we ask for? Ask for small commitment, and get small commitment? A disciple is able to sustain his or her relationship with the risen Jesus.

C. You can call me crazy, but I believe an anonymous disciple is a contradiction in terms...

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- A disciple who does not grow, who does not have the purpose of growing, in their discipleship to Jesus is a contradiction in terms.
- A stagnant or comfortable disciple is a contradiction in terms.
- A disciple who does not change and grow is a contradiction in terms.
- A disciple who does not want to change and grow deeper is a contradiction in terms.

A real disciple of Jesus recognizes the path of last resistance is not the path of discipleship to Jesus.

D. The Holy Spirit wants to build these Three Priorities into your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ. These priorities will incarnated in the life of each disciple in a unique way. But together, they form the basic definition of discipleship to Jesus Christ.

II. The second identifying mark is this: a group of believers who do their discipleship to Jesus together.

A. Ever wonder just why the rank pagans in Thessalonika would give up all their pagan religions and their favorite sins to become disciples of Jesus Christ? Sure, there were some former Jews and Gentile God-fearers in that church. But our text declares the majority of people in that church are former pagans... and they gave all that up all to follow Jesus as His disciples. Question: How does something like that happen?

You see, I Thessalonians tells us that these believers paid a huge price almost immediately to follow Jesus, to become followers of the (only) Way.

Consider the following basic Cost/Benefit Analysis:

Here are just some of the costs these new disciples faced:

1. Potential family conflict
2. Tension with fellow citizens when the disciples refuse to participate in the local cult of Cabirus.
3. Tension with fellow citizens when they talked about the return of Jesus to reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. That could sound like rebellion against Caesar.
4. Potential loss of a job and loss of close friendships.
5. I Thessalonians tells us they successfully withstood

persecution almost immediately.

If following Jesus as a disciple can cost you so much, who would ever become a disciple of Jesus? ...It's all because of what you gain in becoming a disciple of Jesus... the obvious, tangible benefits... the other half of the Cost/Benefit Analysis.

B. Paul, Silas and Timothy did more than preach the basic Apostolic message about Jesus.

1. They came with demonstrations of the power of the Holy Spirit... the powerful exercise of supernatural spiritual gifts like prophecy.
2. God did miracles of healing at their hands.
3. There were personal deliverances from demons and evil spirits. These three items above demonstrated that the message about Jesus being alive from the dead is the truth about God.
4. Each disciple receives the gift of eternal life after death.
5. Each disciple receives the power of God to overcome evil.
6. And each disciple enters a group of other disciples, people share a commitment to Jesus and who are all heading in the same direction... a group where there is costly mutual love and mutual commitment, a group of disciples who experience the Presence of the Holy Spirit together, a group of people with a shared perspective and shared moral values, a group of people who belong to each other as much as they belong to Jesus.

These people in Thessalonika gained far more than they ever gave up! That's why they switched over to following Jesus!

B. A disciple recognizes he or she needs other disciples to survive and thrive as a disciple of Jesus.

You can't do it without God the Holy Spirit. Are you interested in pursuing the life of the Spirit?

You can't do discipleship without a group of other disciples in your life.

III. The third identifying mark of a disciple-making church is this: a group of believers who reach outside to other family, neighbors, co-workers with Christ's message and His love ... to make disciples.

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A. Vs. 8 – the message about Jesus rang out from Thessalonika to all Macedonia and Achaia.

Conclusion ~ God wants our church to become a disciple-making church. That was the approach of Paul, Silas and Timothy. The approach of the disciple-making church.

You get the level of commitment you ask for, the level of commitment you expect or are willing to tolerate and accept. We're getting what we ask for here in the American Church. Festo Kivengere was right about that.