

The Disciple Newsletter

A Newsletter for the Serious Religious Christian
By H. Bruce Stokes, Ph.D.

The Great Commission: A Behavioral Science Perspective

Presented to the faculty of California Baptist University on August 27, 2003 at the 2003 Faculty Workshop.

Introduction

The Great Commission, as understood by Christianity, is the statement made by Jesus of Nazareth to His disciples prior to His ascension into heaven. It is recorded in the Synoptic Gospels and the Book of Acts but is not found in the Gospel of John. In each version of this last instruction of Jesus to His disciples, the emphasis is somewhat different.

Mark's Gospel is the most problematic both in text and theology. There are several alternative endings to Mark's Gospel in the manuscript history of the text. Scholars debate which of these is likely to be the most likely original ending. The received text, dominantly represented by the King James Translation but maintained in most modern translations, contains the most commonly known version of the several text variations of this Gospel. The command is to *Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation* (Mark 16:15 NASB). This version of the Commission also appears to include the necessity of Baptism, and a listing of signs that will follow the believers confirming the Word preached.

Luke's Gospel and companion Acts of the Apostles which claims the same author, more passively states *...that repentance for forgiveness would be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem* (Luke 24:47 NASB).

The Gospel of Matthew, arguably the most Judaic of the Gospels, though it is possible to maintain that John's Gospel is unknowable without a clear familiarity with first century Judaism, is emphatically different from the other gospels in recording this instruction called the Great Commission. Matthew records a fuller more detailed statement that gives context and clarity to the intent of the others. It reads, *All authority is given to Me in heaven and earth. Go therefore* (or more

directly as you are going or have gone The Greek aorist participle renders the going as not the focus of the command. It would more likely read in English an understanding of wherever you go or find yourself.) *and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20 NASB)*. Because of its fuller and more Judaic emphasis, the Matthew version will be the subject of this paper.

The Behavioral Sciences

The Behavioral Sciences, including Anthropology, Sociology, and Psychology are academic disciplines focused on human origins, nature, and behavior. Behavior in this context includes cognition, affect and overt behavior. Because humans are bio-psychological and bio-social, and bio-cultural in relationship to these areas of behavior, that is, humans are both biological natured and cognitive-emotionally nurtured based on socio-cultural contexts, the behavioral sciences must be both biological sciences and social sciences. They focus, unevenly within the respective disciplines, on the individual as well as the group. Together, these disciplines examine patterns of human behavior at the individual personality, social group, and cultural levels. By observation and theory, the behavioral sciences hope to describe, explain, predict, and control human nature and nurture.

A Behavioral Science Perspective on the Great Commission

Theologians examine the Great Commission from the perspective of the theological world view and hermeneutic approach of the investigator. This perspective is important and the discipline of theology (including philosophy) is one that must be considered in understanding the Great Commission. But the behavioral sciences can assist in understanding the context of "The Commission" as a psychological, sociological, and cultural fact. By examining the Great Commission from the perspective of the behavioral sciences, we can add to the understanding of the intent and common or normative behavioral context of the statement.

The plain language of the Matthew statement by Jesus to His disciples is that they are to *make disciples of all the nations*. No mention of the Gospel or its message is directly stated in the Matthew text. This means that the commission is about discipleship, not merely evangelism This is not to remove the Gospel proclamation from the commission, but it prevents equating the message with the commission.. There are to be new disciples from all ethnic identity

groups. This has two implications. One is the possibility that the disciples will cease to be identified with their nationality or ethnicity. That is, this is a call to convert the nations by assimilation into Israel, or at least this form of Judaism. That this is a possible interpretation of the command is demonstrated by the problem presented in the book of Acts that some of the disciples from the Pharisaic tradition of Judaism believed that the Gentiles must be circumcised and follow the traditions of Judaism to be truly saved. Acts 15 explains this struggle to decide whether the Gentiles must become Jews religiously to be saved. The conclusion was that the Jews and Gentiles had equal access to God without converting religious or peoplehood identity..

The other view, and the one which appears to be the approved one, is that in each people- language-national group, there are to be disciples. The primary intent of the Commission is that a group of disciples are to be developed in every people group and in every place that the disciples find themselves.

The behavioral science question in all this is whether the call to make disciples is about making disciples in the sense of adherents to a shared message, or, the establishment of a discipleship system which engenders mentoring relationship within a relational community that becomes the carrier and expression of this message. The answer to this question gives assistance to understanding the Great Commission, and challenges contemporary Christians to reconsider our direction.

Systems of Discipleship

Anthropologists have discovered discipleship systems in most cultures of the world. These systems have some common features. These features are:

1. The discipleship systems are relational in that they involve a Master-Disciple relationship.
2. The systems include rites of passage and reinforcement that initiate, identify and reinforce the disciple's identification with the Master and among the fellow disciples.
3. The discipleship structure includes the guidance of the disciple into the knowledge, skills and values of the discipleship system being learned.
4. The disciple never views themselves as above their master but are

intended to become a master to other disciples to perpetuate the system.

The discipleship systems of the Far East cultures include religious-philosophic systems and martial arts systems. In the Western Cultures, discipleship systems were common among trades and craft guilds. In the Middle East, Judaism in particular, made use of discipleship systems as a mainstay for retaining Judaism's existence after the loss of the First Temple and to maintain distinct sects within Judaism during the Second Temple period. It is in this particular context that the Judeo-Christian community developed using the same discipleship system.

The Judeo-Christian Discipleship System

The typical discipleship structure of the Second Temple period was built around a Master-Teacher, called a Rabbi, who had several disciples. Commonly, a group of ten or twelve disciples might be maintained. This number was symbolic of the basic minyan. The basis for this in Judaism is debated but several reasons are suggested. One is that the number ten is about accountability as in the story of Abraham asking God to spare Sodom if ten righteous could be found. A second explanation is that the number of spies sent to report on the Promised Land numbered ten, required for public prayer and other established ritual, or as a symbolic representation of the tribes of Israel. Within the group of disciples, a smaller group of two or three would be the primary focus of the Rabbi who would often use them to train the younger or newer disciples. While the Rabbi would teach larger groups of people, the primary relationship was between the Rabbi and his disciples. The four characteristics stated above of a common discipleship system existed in this basic Jewish form which was adopted by the early disciples of Jesus. The New Testament gives many examples of this system being used by the early Church community.

The Master – Disciple relationship was the basic foundation of this Judeo-Christian system. This life to life relationship was primarily between men. Women were part of these disciple systems as is clearly seen by the women who accompanied Jesus and His disciples. But the women were seen as kinship extensions of the discipleship group. Usually they were mothers, sisters or wives of the disciples, who lived together, interacting on a daily basis, and who learned together the world view, values, skills, and knowledge that their Rabbi taught them. They were accountable to each other and developed a fictive kinship that became as important, if not more important, than their family.

kinship. We see this structure in John the Baptist with his disciples, Jesus with His disciples, Peter with Barnabus, and Paul with Timothy, Silas and Titus. The relationship between master and disciple was the conduit for the exchange of this religious system. This was not a classroom approach. The Master would teach in the context of life, by lecture, by example, by task, and by observation, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect. Teaching was in group and individual contexts so that the development of the disciple was assured and paced to the needs of the disciple.

The discipleship system of the early believers, involved an intentional relationship that included rites of passage and reinforcement. Baptisms, of many types, were common practice in Judaism for conversion, status change from common to holy, repentance and as the initiation into the relationship with a master and fellow disciples. John engaged his disciples in a baptism of repentance and preparation. Jesus disciples also baptized a baptism of repentance, though Jesus did not baptize. But in the Great Commission, a baptism, different than John's Acts 19:1-7 explains a group of disciples baptized using John's baptism of repentance, who upon hearing the Gospel, are baptized again. This baptism is in the name and authority of Jesus. , is required that is based on the authority of Jesus and in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This baptism is one of identification with that authority and name, and involved allegiance to that authority and name. This rite of passage is the manner of declaring oneself to be a disciple of Jesus and a fellow of this community of disciples. Beyond baptism, the symbols of the Passover Seder were also used to reinforce this identification with Jesus and the believing community by "eating this bread and drinking this cup in remembrance of Me", as Jesus had taught them. The Last Supper symbols focus on the person of Jesus as given on the behalf of the disciples. They belong to the Lord and each other and express this truth through the rituals of the community. This is explicit in the Great Commission. *Make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).*

As listed above, the discipleship system involved teaching the knowledge, skills, and values of the system through the medium of the Rabbi in the context of the community.

Typically the Rabbi would teach, monitor and correct the disciples as they learned the system and internalized it so that the system became the world view of the disciple. This was not a matter of instruction and testing. In involved dialog, instruction, example and task based learning that was monitored and corrected to insure the understanding by the disciple. The teachings are passed from master to disciple with minimal alteration. The Rabbi is not the author of the system, but the

carrier. He has a responsibility to the Senior Master of the system to maintain the integrity of that system and teach within that structure. This does not mean no variation exists. This certainly happens. But the system is not arbitrarily changed at the whim of a Rabbi. The Great Commission specifically addresses this. Those baptized are to be taught to *observe all that I commanded you*. This use of the term “observe” is particularly Jewish. Observance in Judaism is both knowing and doing. To observe or keep the Sabbath is not to simply know about it, but to understand and behave accordingly. Jesus had taught His disciples many things. They were to be sure that their disciples would be taught the same things and that they would do them.

Among the things Jesus taught was that the Torah and the Prophets, making up the Hebrew Bible, was to be understood and obeyed correctly, not discarded. *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever, then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps and teaches them, shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17-19)* This passage makes it clear that, though Jesus often rejected the way that some of the commandments were being observed, (and He corrected these for His disciples) He never taught that they were to be rejected. His disciples must teach and do them until all is fulfilled and heaven and earth passes away. This is not to say that salvation is accomplished by keeping the Law. Clearly Jesus is telling them that their place and reward in the kingdom is the focus. Salvation is a matter of a righteousness of faith, not works. I have addressed this in a paper on the relationship between the Gospel and the Torah which can be accessed at www.disciplecenter.com.

Jesus maintained that the two greatest commandments were to Love God and to Love one’s neighbor as oneself. All the Law and Prophets depend of these two commands. (Matt. 22:36-40). To these, He added another broad command upon which discipleship depends. *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34,35)*. The Great Commission then involves this requirement that those who are baptized are to be taught to observe all that He has commanded. This is the “making” of a disciple. But this is not the end.

The last characteristic of the discipleship system is that the disciple becomes a disciple maker himself. In this he never exceeds his own

master in the process, but may take on students of his own and in them, may do greater things than his master. This notion of humility in never exceeding one's own teacher in the relational respect, yet having the potential of accomplishing more than the master is also found in the scriptures. Jesus taught that a *disciple is not above his master. It is enough that he be as his master (Matt. 10:24)*. The application of this general rule is placed in the context that a student will be treated the same as his master but the application is being drawn from this general notion that a student never is higher in place than his teacher, even if he exceeds him in accomplishments. Yet He also said that *the one who believes in Him will do greater works than He had done (John 14:12)*. This principle in most discipleship systems requires a permanent humility and deference to one's teacher regardless of one's own accomplishments or prominence among others. A person who exceeds all others is seen to be benefiting from what those before him have given him. A great student demonstrates that he is a result of a great master. So once one has become mature in the system, he will take his own place as a teacher but will always be indebted and subservient to his own master. In my own experience in Jujitsu, this is the case. I will never be above my teacher. I will always be indebted to him. Those whom I teach will be indebted to me and him because what I taught them came from him and ultimately from the original master sensei.

This last part assumes that the discipleship system will be perpetuated by the students of each generation and that this system will continue. This is also found in the Biblical texts with regard to our faith. Paul, to his own disciple Timothy, tells him, *the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others (II Tim. 2:2)*. This responsibility to disciple others is a sharing in the stewardship of the discipline which is being taught and safeguarded. We are to select faithful disciples who will be able to grow to maturity and become masters of other disciples who will continue this until in all nations (people groups), there are disciples who are fully instructed in the faith, once for all delivered to the saints, and who can be a community of witness from which this Good News (Gospel) of the Kingdom can be demonstrated and proclaimed.

Conclusion

The behavioral sciences offer a perspective on the Great Commission by viewing it, not merely as a message to be proclaimed to the nations, but as a system of discipleship that is to be established in all people groups. These disciples, as a group of witnesses, will become a testimony of identification with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

And from this community of disciples, the Gospel message will be proclaimed in word and deed. In addition, the Original Master-Teacher will be there to guarantee its effectiveness until the end of the age.

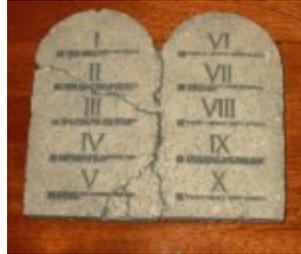
This system is relational between a mature experienced master and a group of learning apprentice disciples. It is marked by an identification ritual that establishes who is a disciple. It involves learning and living the knowledge, skills, and values of the system. And it perpetuates itself by turning disciples into masters who disciple others. It is done anywhere and everywhere we find ourselves and it requires a serious intent to be faithful to the teachings of the original Master and Lord.

The implications of this view give pause to those who consider family, congregation, education and ministry. It is not a professional pastorate. It is not a market orientation. It is not a compartmentalized education system that produces knowledge and skills. It is not an ideology to which one converts and then participates as interest dictates. It is a life orientation. It is a discipline which includes values and character that is as much caught as taught. This requires a relationship beyond that of teacher and student as seen in our university context. It requires a life to life relationship that builds from one mature person to other maturing ones and from generation to generation. It is an approach that has been used in most cultures, in most geographies, by most disciplines at one time or another.

Anyone who considers the purpose of the Great Commission must at least wrestle with this structure. It may, in fact, only be the original launching of the Great Commission. That is, it may have been how it all got started and is subject to adaptation as need and culture determines. Or, as it appears to me, it may be the Great Commission itself. We must consider whether the Great Commission is a message requiring only a successful and effective method of delivery, or, it is a method for establishing a community that is witness to a message from which we may not stray without doing damage to the message itself. The establishment of communities of disciples at Galatia, Corinth, Jerusalem and everywhere the message was presented seem to be testimony to the need of discipleship communities as a natural outgrowth and integral part of the Great Commission.

If CBU is to be a university committed to the Great Commission, we must determine how we can work in concert with this discipleship structure and the communities it produces. We must be able to assist both the process of discipleship and the relationships required by that discipleship process. The Great Commission does not require the establishment of a university, but a university committed to The Great Commission may assist in the development and effectiveness of the

disciples who seriously undertake the task of making other disciples. And we may be able to remind the churches and institutions that have developed in adjunct to, or in absence of this discipling system, that this call to make disciples may be added to by such institutions, but not replaced.



Copyright© 2003-2007 HBStokes/The DiscipleCenter – All Rights Reserved
For technical questions/assistance with this site, please contact [The Brookman Company](#)