

PLACE MATTERS

THE **CHURCH** FOR THE **COMMUNITY**

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AND **BILL KRISPIN**



Fort Washington, PA 19034

Place Matters

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DEDICATION

Coz:

To those unlikely people in unlikely spaces doing the remarkable work of our Lord while receiving little to no earthly attention—you form the foundation of God's work in hard places. Your stories need to be told to inspire the rest of us onward.

Bill:

This book is dedicated to those close to me who have most shaped and influenced my life and thought—my wife of fifty years, Mary, and our five children: Karen, Jonathan, Timothy, Rebecca, and Elizabeth, along with their spouses and our fifteen grandchildren. Our extended family also includes our church family at Pilgrim Presbyterian in Philadelphia and the Christ Fellowship in Valdosta, Georgia, where we spend the winter months.

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I also want to thank ministry teams with whom I have had the opportunity to serve. They have poured into my life, particularly at Young Life in Australia, Bethel Temple Community Bible Church, Esperanza Health Center, the Simple Way, and Spirit and Truth Fellowship in the United States. Thanks also to Dr. Williams and Dr. Toews at Cairn University for their support as I wrote this book.

Most of all, I want to thank my family—Joyce, Saiyeh, Melanie, Emma, and Tony—who teach me new ways to see our community, challenge my conceptions, and overcome what seem to be impossible obstacles. You live out what I can often only conceptualize.

—Coz

There are so many people I need to thank. They include the family of Center for Urban Theological Studies (CUTS), students I have taught and who have taught me much of what I know about Philadelphia ministry. I also want to thank those who have supported and mentored me over the years: Dr. Willie Richardson, Dr. Bill Grier, Dr. Wesley Pinnock, Bishop Eric Ricks, and, last but not least, Dr. Bob DeMoss, who taught and encouraged me to lead my family during its younger years. Your respective influences are all deep and profound. I also want to thank the staff of CLC who made this book possible: David Almack, Erika Cobb (whose support and patient prodding kept things moving), and Becky English (whose editorial assistance turned a very rough manuscript into a special jewel).

—Bill

PREFACE

For many years, our friends have encouraged us to write a book together. When we first met, almost twenty years ago, Bill was a seminary-trained urban practitioner known for his Bible teaching and understanding of the history of the greater Philadelphia area. I wasn't much of a reader. I was more identified by my no-nonsense, boots-on-the-ground approach to life and ministry in an urban setting. Our common love for the city of Philly and passion for incarnational urban ministry drew us together, and our differing gifts have challenged us both and helped us grow together as we lived among and served people in our local communities.

Over the last century, the American church has moved from a parish ministry to a regional, building-centered, program-focused ministry. The result is that people often worship in locations somewhat distant from their own neighborhoods, and local communities are left without a vital incarnational witness to the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. But the local community around a church actually matters! If we as believers can understand our own communities, we can build connections to effectively carry out God's calling in them.

As we studied trends and noticed this growing problem, we decided to start a ministry in 2009 called Common Grace Inc. with our friend Nes Espinosa. Our goal was to understand and nurture Christianity in Philadelphia by building partnerships between churches and ministries across neighborhoods. In the past eight years, we have interacted with many ministry models, watched as trends came and went, and witnessed communities transform. All of this has reinforced our belief that place matters.

My wife, Joyce, and I have lived and served in north Philadelphia for almost two decades. I am an Australian and have served with Young Life, Bethel Temple, and Wyoming Avenue Baptist, where I ministered with youth and led economic and community development. Joyce is a Pennsylvania girl. A graduate of Eastern University, she served as a school teacher in southwest Philly and the Dominican Republic before landing in north Philadelphia. She has been a pioneer for women coming into the community, worked extensively in children's ministry, and now focuses on mentoring women. We have three daughters—Saiyeh, Melanie, and Emma—and a son, Tony David Luis. Each of our kids has a growing love and understanding of Philadelphia, its poverty, and its special place in God's kingdom.

—Coz

I have been involved in Philadelphia urban ministry for forty-four years. Born and raised on the north side of Chicago, I came to Westminster Seminary in 1965 with the intent of eventually returning to my hometown. But in 1967, Jack Miller challenged me to take up urban ministry in Philadelphia. So following an internship at Tenth Presbyterian, I moved with my wife, Mary, to south Philadelphia to plant Emmanuel Chapel as an Orthodox Presbyterian congregation. All five of our children

were born during these years. Early on, I got involved in a prayer group of Philadelphia pastors, who initiated the Westminster Saturday Seminar. That became the Center for Urban Theological Studies (CUTS) in 1978, where I served as executive director for nearly twenty years. I have also served as the pastor of Pilgrim Church in the Roxborough/Manayunk section of Philadelphia and been executive director of CityNet Ministries for planting churches in our city and region. Now in my retirement, I serve as a senior research fellow for Common Grace.

Both of us are often asked to help people understand the communities in Philadelphia, and other cities in the United States and around the world. Whether we have worked with new church planters, seasoned pastors, relocating families, or academic students, we have seen a need to help people understand the community where they are or will be ministering. We have at times been heartbroken, watching individuals and ministries fail in the mission to make disciples because they had little understanding or connection to the place where they are located. We have also been encouraged and challenged by unlikely people serving in unlikely places all around the world. Their work should inspire us all.

In this book, we lay out a theology of place, the foundation from which all ministry flows. We give examples of how we have seen people living intentionally in their places, and we offer long-term analysis of what works and what doesn't. We also give tools and techniques to take these ideas from theory to reality. We can say with full confidence that incarnational living really does work.

Our central passion in writing this book is to encourage churches and church planters to engage their surrounding

communities with the gospel. This book isn't for someone looking to grow numbers in their ministry, as there are plenty of books out there on how to attract people. It is for people who want to see kingdom growth—new disciples being made rather than Christians simply moving from one church to another.

This book does not stand alone. We are always encouraged to see what an incredibly diverse range of people and ministries have been effective in community-based ministry—people not restricted by a particular doctrine or stylized practice but motivated by a commitment to love every person as Christ has called us to.

—Bill

No one church has all the gifts and resources needed to transform the communities of Philadelphia or any other city. Philadelphia is a city of 1.5 million people, made up of hundreds of microcommunities, each functioning as part of the whole yet still distinct from each other. Each of these communities must be reached by local churches if we are to see transformation happen. It is only as we work together as the whole body of Christ that we can carry out the Great Commission in our local communities. This is why we assist ministries in their work to cooperate with each other and reach the urban community by connecting, supporting, and mobilizing church and community leaders as they seek to spread the gospel and address the needs of their communities. We encourage you to read broadly and, even more, to visit and engage with others in ministry in your area. Don't consider just the new and flashy work or the pastor on the speaking circuit, but dig deep into your community to find those serving without attention.

This book is a mix of strategic principles for engaging in community-based ministry and biblical exposition on key passages

related to the incarnational ministry modeled by Christ. We use stories to illustrate the outworking of these principles and passages. We have been effectively teaching these techniques (Bill for more than fifty years, Coz for not quite so long) and applying them in a diverse range of communities. We hope we can impart some of this knowledge so that you, in turn, will be better equipped to do the most blessed work of loving those around you.

Ultimately, our hope is that whether you are a church planter, a pastor, or a ministry leader, you will be challenged to lead your church to connect with your surrounding community in multiple ways. We look forward to hearing your stories of community engagement. Please email your stories to Commongracephilly@gmail.com. Our heart's prayer is that every man, woman, and child in your surrounding community will have multiple opportunities to see, hear, and be touched by the powerful, life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ.

PART 1

**THE CALL—LIVING THE GOSPEL IN OUR
COMMUNITIES**

1

BEING CHURCH IN THE COMMUNITY

When you think of your calling and vision for ministry, what comes to your mind? Do you think of your microworld—that is, those in your local church—or do you look more broadly at the macroworld made up of your neighborhood, your city, and your personal world where you live every day?

Christ calls us to look not just at those who attend our local churches but also at the people we rub shoulders with on the sidewalk in front of our houses, in our neighborhood grocery stores, in the local parks where our kids play. When we stop and take a good look at our own communities, we realize that we are looking at a world that is lost, broken, and largely forgotten by the church.

This brokenness is why Jesus sent His disciples out into the communities around them.

The Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and

place where he was about to go. He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.” (Luke 10:1–3)

Our local communities are vast, rich harvest fields. But this crop cannot be harvested without workers, many more than we have. We must pray to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into the harvest field. God wants a multiplicity of workers putting their lives to work, and the vision is larger than any one person or even one church can accomplish. God wants every man, woman, and child in the world around us to have multiple opportunities to hear, see, and be touched by the powerful gospel of Christ.¹ This is the message of our book.

As coauthors, we also live and minister in Philadelphia, a city of 1.5 million people within a larger metropolitan area of 6 million.² Someone who knows the statistics might say, “Your region has more than four thousand churches—one for every 1,500 people.” But it is estimated that the average church in the United States has only 178 people in attendance on any given Sunday.³ In Philly, that translates to only about 12 percent of the population. The harvest field is vast and ripe not just on the foreign mission field. It is vast and ripe right here in our Western communities. Who will work to harvest those in the areas directly around us?

That’s the challenge and the opportunity, and they’re bigger than any one of us. We need all the partners we can find and we need to work in concert with one another to engage in this harvest ministry. Are you ready to join the battle for the world?

KNOWING OUR COMMUNITIES

Whether you live in a challenged urban neighborhood, an expanding suburban community, or an area swarming with new city gentrifiers, we have to understand our local communities and the changes taking place in them if we want to have any chance of reaching them with the gospel.

I have lived in my neighborhood, northeast of Center City Philadelphia, for more than a decade. My local community, Frankford, is quite diverse, both ethnically and economically. And like many of Philadelphia's communities, it's changing.

When my family first moved here, we lived next door to a Grace Brethren church. Its building had once been a veteran's hall, although originally it had been one of the Frankford mansions. I'd walk past the back of that church, down through the park, and turn left onto Orthodox Street, and on the corner was "Seven Up"—the Seventh United Presbyterian Church. On the next corner was the large Methodist church and opposite that another old stone church. Then I'd pass the Quaker meeting hall, dating back to 1775. A block down and I encountered the El, Philadelphia's elevated transit line. Under the El in Frankford (never a pleasant place, especially after dark) were more large church buildings—Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist. Also nearby was the local Catholic church, boasting a large modern building with the requisite school attached.

Ten years later (years that don't feel as long as they were), the lot where the Methodist building stood is now vacant, the building having fallen down. "Seven Up" houses a small congregation from a Word of Faith church. The Brethren have shut down. The Catholic complex, including the school, was sold at

auction. The Quakers run a school, Frankford Friends, but most of its students now come from outside our community. One stone church is occupied by an Indian Malankara congregation. Although our community is culturally diverse, this particular congregation drives in from other areas and they have put their building up for sale. You could take all the people who attend church on Sundays at the other traditional churches and fit them all in one small building. A really small building.

Frankford is a historical community. Frankford Avenue was once part of the King's Highway, one of the oldest ridge roads in America, and played a part in national history, including the Underground Railroad. Frankford has also been home to some of Philadelphia's historically significant black churches and white churches.

Today most of the churches in Frankford are quite small, sharing space with other churches or housed in storefronts. The huge old stone churches were built big, with parsonages attached or nearby, because they once had large congregations housed inside them. They didn't have parking lots because when they were built, their members walked to church. These churches anchored the community through growth and change and challenge. Now they are monuments or memorials to a time long past.

In the thirteen years or so that I lived in Kensington, a neighborhood about a mile south of Frankford, I saw almost every mainline denominational church close down or merge. On Allegheny Avenue, where I lived, every church building except the ones owned by the Catholic churches changed hands, some more than once.

WHAT'S HINDERING US?

The idea for Common Grace Inc. started when Bill imagined a group that could strategically work to facilitate church unification. Instead of coming to join, people would go out and see what God was already doing in urban communities and bring people together to reach those areas for Christ.

As we work with groups in Philadelphia and beyond, we are often amazed at how little local churches know about one another and especially how little new church planters know about the communities they have targeted for church plants. It's a given that people plant churches because they believe there is a need in a community. They can usually cite some statistic about the lack of a "real gospel presence" there, but few know the real story of the community and the church there.

This happens for many reasons. One is that pastors and church planters tend to be busy, driven by the needs they see in front of them and inspired to reach new people with the gospel. Another is that most church plants are given a three- to five-year window to be up and running and financially independent—a challenging goal to achieve, especially in complex and diverse communities—so church planters aren't easily afforded the time to settle into the community. Sometimes it is because people are arrogant in thinking that God talks only through them, their denomination, and their theological perspective.

The major reason, though, is that too often existing churches and church plants see themselves in competition for the small pool of existing believers who already attend church services. Church planters also compete for those who can be leaders and financial givers and help the churches grow and move forward.

They often do this without intent, though at times it is purposeful. They may think the existing churches are irrelevant, ineffective, not real Bible churches, or not missional enough. Instead of becoming strategic allies in the Kingdom with a common mission of reaching every man, woman, and child with the transforming gospel of Christ, churches and church planters often function as independent tribes, appearing at war with one another and failing to reach out to the people around them.

In the midst of this tribalism is the disturbing fact that fewer and fewer people are attending church in the United States. As we noted earlier, on any given Sunday in Philadelphia, Common Grace estimates that about 12 percent of the population is in church. That leaves 88 percent of the population outside the church. This is the dominant market share, so to speak. And these are the people we are called to reach.

Many blame the decline of the church on how we have entered the post-Christian age, or on the fact that millennials don't share the values of their parents, or that immigrants from non-Christian countries are coming to the West in far greater numbers. All these factors may be contributors to the decline of the church; but without a doubt, a large part of the problem is that local churches and church planters are woefully underprepared to understand the changing demographics of our communities, cities, counties, and country as a whole. When we don't understand who lives in our communities, we have little chance of reaching those people and that is when the statistics play out. Despite the waves of church planting that many are embracing today, there are more churches closing down than being planted in most of the country.

The world around us is continuously changing and we must learn to adapt to our ever-changing communities. Most church

leaders have had some training in exegesis (or interpretation) of the Scriptures; but few know how to practice exegesis of their communities, let alone understand how to read and engage them.

In the following chapters, we lay out what we think are essential components to learning a community with the goal of reaching every person in a given neighborhood with the gospel. (We will use the term “neighborhood” to describe a specific geographic location and the term “community” to describe the connections between the people who live in a geographic location.) We will look at how a neighborhood is outlined; the spiritual, physical, and psychological boundaries that define that area; and how to build strategic alliances in our communities instead of creating competitors and enemies. We will cover how to embrace our communities, be part of building up their God-given assets, develop leaders, and steward what God has given each of us. This is all mandated by Jesus’ command to “go and make disciples” (Matt. 28:19), and we will distinguish this from making converts or growing our own churches.

Undergirding this will be a theology of place—the idea that place matters.

COME BE WITH ME

Why does place matter? Does the gospel demand our presence in and for our local communities? Or are we truly more effective when we build large churches and attract an entire region of commutable people to our buildings because they fit the economic, racial, or social status that makes us feel most comfortable?

In the incarnation, Christ the living Word became flesh and lived among us.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:1–18)

As the incarnational body of Christ today, the church is called to bring the presence and touch of Christ into our local communities. This doesn't mean just bringing the presence of Christ to a local church building or among a gathering of Christians but living out the very presence—the incarnation—of Christ in our neighborhoods.

John further amplifies this great truth by saying:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with

the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)

This fellowship is transformational both in our relationship to God and in our relationships with one another.

John says that they had seen and heard Jesus, that their hands had touched Him. This tells us that Jesus was up close and personal with His disciples and the masses He encountered. He didn't communicate with them in formal religious settings but interacted with them in daily, real-life situations. Jesus spent three years with His disciples on a daily basis.

Note further Jesus' calling of the first disciples in Matthew 4:18–22.

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

"Come, follow Me" is another way of saying "Come, be with Me." The call to discipleship is a call to engagement with Christ in all of life. Seeing, touching, and hearing are all part of this

process. Today we rarely know our fellow church attendees outside of the formal worship setting on a Sunday morning. If we don't interact with each other in our local communities on a day-to-day basis, how will the unbelieving world ever see, hear, and be touched by Christ?

Place matters to God. Place always mattered to Jesus. The Gospel narratives distinguish the locations of Jesus and the disciples throughout their writing. Jesus knew His local audience, and His message was directed toward that audience in such a way as to connect with the people. It mattered to Him whether He was in Jerusalem or Galilee. He chose His words and delivery differently depending on whether He was in Caesarea Philippi or Capernaum, Samaria or Jerusalem.

We see that the idea of place matters to God throughout the Old Testament as well, and is woven into our historical narrative as believers. From creation taking place in a garden to heaven being formed as an eternal city, where we are and what we do in each location matters.

PLACE MATTERS

In the past twenty-five years, we have seen a rise in attractional regional churches that draw people from extended geographic areas to their buildings. This kind of church does not connect well to its surrounding neighborhood or to the communities where most attendees live. Church life revolves around the building, and all or most of the church's resources and gifts are directed internally to those already attending. Why? Because it is a lot easier to attract people to upscale buildings and program-heavy, highly resourced churches than to meet people in

our local neighborhoods and find ways to connect with them. And because, when it comes down to it, it is easier to attract existing Christians to the new show in town than to go and make disciples of the unreached.

This phenomenon of the attractional and regional model was evidenced early on when churches moved to the suburbs and created institutions that were detached from place. A neighborhood-focused church that partnered with other local churches within a specific geography to represent Christ to everyone in that area just seemed like plain hard work.

The term “parish” used to hold a lot of meaning. A parish is a specifically defined geographic area in which a church and its people are embedded and where they both live and serve. Today, however, the church has almost entirely lost our understanding of this concept.

At a meeting of foster care agencies in Philadelphia, I (Coz) was approached by one of the leaders of the Catholic services. “I heard your introduction,” the man said to me. “You’re one of those evangelicals?”

“Yes, I guess you could call me that,” I replied.

“Okay, I have a question for you. I’ve been wondering for a long time why you guys get to choose which church you go to. I mean, how does that work? We just go to the church they tell us to for our neighborhood.”

I smiled, but I wondered about the deeper implications of the question. Transportation, technology, culture, economics, and family structure have changed dramatically in the last century, so shouldn’t we expect the church to change as well? Why should we care about our local neighborhoods the way churches used to and focus on reaching people there to make disciples in a specific geography?

Because the attractional regional model has failed us miserably in fulfilling the mission given to the church by God to go and make disciples. Because no matter how many large, apparently successful churches we can point to, especially since the introduction of the seeker-sensitive models, overall the church in the United States is in decline. Only in isolation do these growing churches show any kind of success,⁴ yet when looked at in the larger picture, not only are they part of a declining church model, they may in fact be a major contributor to that decline.

The missional challenge to us today is that “God wants every man, woman and child to have repeated opportunities to hear, see, be touched by, and respond to an incarnational, geographically close, and linguistically and culturally relevant presentation of the gospel of the Kingdom which proclaims that God in Christ has rectified what the first Adam could not do.”⁵ For the Philadelphia metropolitan area, that means finding ways to reach out to six million people, of whom Common Grace estimates fewer than one million are currently in a worship entity of any kind on any given Sunday.

Epic is a relatively new church in our city. Just seven years old, it has grown rapidly and now has four locations, with some 1,500 attendees altogether. It uses media technology to transmit the sermon to each location. The church has a young congregation, though in the last few years it has become increasingly multigenerational. Many parents came to see what attracted their children and ended up staying. The church is also quite racially and ethnically diverse. It is indeed a unique gathering.

I (Bill) have been blessed recently to get to know Kent Jacobs, the lead pastor of Epic Church. We’ve met regularly to engage

in discussions about ministry. In a conversation about vision and mission, I challenged him to think about his responsibility to work toward reaching the entire city. After a moment of thought, he said, “We can never do that all by ourselves.”

I said, “That’s why you need all the partners you can find.”

A short time later, a staff member who was aware of the church’s desire to be part of reaching all 1.5 million people in the city suggested that Epic could stand for “Every Person in the City.” That’s it! God wants all 1.5 million people in the city of Philadelphia—and in every city across America and around the world—to hear, see, and be touched by the powerful gospel of Jesus in multiple ways through word and deed ministry.

This vision is far bigger than us, and none of us can fulfill it by ourselves. To achieve this goal, the local church will need to build strategic alliances for the harvest in our local neighborhoods.

This vision changes everything.

2

CALLED TO DISCIPLE MAKING

Christ calls believers to follow Him as disciples. In that work, we carry on His mission of making disciples of the nations through the witness of the gospel. It requires that we be done with the life of sin and follow Christ in a life of whole-souled obedience to all that He has commanded.

Whether we're twenty-five, fifty, or eighty years old, we start out as babies when we come to Christ. At that point, we begin a lifelong process of growing to be like Christ Himself. We will not fully understand spiritual maturity by examining only the lives of the most mature Christians. We must study Christ Jesus Himself. He is the mature One who inspires our growth.

What a contrast discipleship is to our modern concept of church membership! One can be a church member in good standing by merely attending church once or twice a month and contributing modestly to the church treasury. Even after years of regularly attending church, many members today remain babies in Christ. Jesus calls us not to be just church members or

attendees but to be His disciples, following Him in His mission to share the gospel with the world.

Indeed, He gives us a high and holy calling to follow Him to make disciples in Matthew 28:19–20.

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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

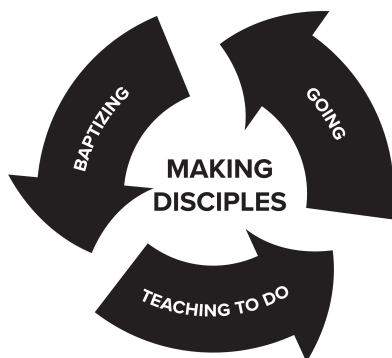
We will probe these verses around four themes. First, Christ instructs us about the mission of the church. Second, He gives us the message we are to proclaim. Third, He delineates the method. Finally, He will show us the importance of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

GOD’S MISSION: MAKE DISCIPLES

First, we want to look at God’s mission for His church. When we look at Matthew 28:19–20, we find four action words: “go,” “make,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” Only one of these is a command; the other three are participles telling us how to carry out the command. The command, or the mission, in this passage is simply this: “Make disciples!”

In order to make disciples, however, we need to do the other three things. We need to be going, we need to be baptizing, and we need to be teaching the disciples to observe, or obey, all that the Lord has commanded.

The word “disciple” represents a personal attachment between a teacher and a student, a master and a worker. From a Christian point of view, a disciple is a follower of Jesus whose whole life is redirected from sin and self to obedience to Christ.



Jesus said to the disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations.” It is important to understand the concept of the nations if we are to understand our mission. “Nation” comes from the Greek word *ethne*, the origin for our word “ethnic.”

When we think of the word “nation,” it is natural for us first to think of a geographical or political entity. We are to go to all the nations of the earth, all the different people in different places ruled by different governments. This understanding of geographical nations is reinforced in Acts 2:5: “Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation.” But the word *ethne* does not just refer to the nations of the world. It is most often used in the New Testament to talk about Gentiles. Now when we use the word “Gentile,” we immediately think of a religious distinction between Jews and Gentiles.

In Acts 11:1, we are told that the apostles and brothers in Judea learned the Gentiles had also heard the word of God. The gospel had come at Antioch to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people. In Ephesians 2:11, the apostle Paul, writing to the Gentile church in Ephesus, speaks of its members as being “called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision.’”

He is clearly referring to Gentiles as “the uncircumcised.” The gospel is to go to the uncircumcised—the Gentiles of the world.

But the word *ethne* also refers even more strongly to the people of the world when it is translated as “heathen” or “pagans.” This usage delineates a distinction between believers and unbelievers, between those who are rebels and those who are obedient. Peter says, “Live such good lives among the pagans [*ethne*] that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet. 2:12). In other words, “Bring the gospel to the pagans.” Peter uses *ethne* again in First Peter 4:3 when he says, “You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do—living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.” *Ethne* is beginning to sound more like our own world. It’s beginning to sound more like our own former ways of life.

Indeed, the origin of *ethne* in Scripture has to do with the sons of disobedience. We find this most graphically in the Genesis 11 story of the Tower of Babel. As the sons of disobedience there grew in number, they became rebels. They took a stand against the Lord, who had told them to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (see 1:28; 9:1). They were determined not to listen to what God said but instead to stay where they were and make a name for themselves by building a tower up into heaven to show the world how great they were. When the Lord looked down from heaven and saw their rebellion, He decided to confuse their language so that they could no longer conspire together against Him.

This is the beginning of the nations—the different governments, different languages, different ethnic groupings—we know now. From this point on, the story of Scripture is the story of the obedient children of God contrasted with the sons

and daughters of disobedience who have chosen to rebel against God. Human history is a long history of the hatred among the peoples of the world—the ethne—and the deep-seated alienation that festers into continual hostility. Christ calls believers to address these walls of alienation with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Only in Christ can and will the walls come down.

What God is saying in His commission to the church is that we are to take the gospel not to believers but to the rebels, the unbelievers. That is the mission. We are to go to the disobedient sinners of the world in the places where they live and raise up a generation of people who are obedient to Jesus Christ. Take the gospel to the Gentiles, the heathens, the pagans, the children of disobedience.

The apostle Paul did just that. When he addressed those gathered together in the Areopagus in Athens, he said:

People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he

marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your own poets have said, “We are his offspring.” (Acts 17:22–28)

This is why God moves and relocates people to new places—so they can hear the message of the gospel of Christ. Place matters.

The picture of disobedience is described further in Ephesians 2, where Paul gives a description of our lives before we met Jesus. This rebellion characterizes the nations to whom God wants us to carry the gospel.

You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. (2:1–3)

Before we met Jesus, we were the *ethne*. We were among the children of disobedience—dead sinners under the wrath and curse of God. Paul goes on to say that in addition to being dead sinners, we were “Gentiles by birth and . . . separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in

the world” (Eph. 2:11–12). We didn’t know Jesus. We weren’t following Jesus. We were excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of promise because we were without God in this world.

What a hopeless picture it is to be without Jesus in the world—dead rebels against God without the gospel touching one’s life. It is not some distant place Jesus is talking about. He is talking about our own neighborhoods, cities, states, and country. It starts right here.

GOD’S MESSAGE: RECONCILED TO GOD AND EACH OTHER

The message of the gospel is that we can be reconciled to God and therefore to each other. This message of hope is found only in Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 2, Paul tells us that we were dead in our trespasses and sins; but then he says, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (2:4–5). Thank God for the “buts” of Scripture. Yes, we may have a sin dilemma but look at what Jesus has done!

In verses 13–14, after giving us that description of how awful it is to be without Jesus, Paul says, “In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” In Christ Jesus mercy is to be found!

Not only does Christ make peace for us with God, He makes peace between us and our enemies. When we come to Christ together, we are “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow

citizens with God's people and also members of his household . . . being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:19–22).

As believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are given the assignment of going out into a sin-broken world with the message of God's hope. We are to declare the good news that Jesus has come to set us free from sin and death and bring us into glorious liberty as children of God whose lives will be characterized by obedience to Him. The Lord has given us wonderful insight and made us stewards of the mysteries of His gospel (see 3:6). The Gentiles—the *ethne*—are heirs together with Israel: members of one family, one household, one body, sharers of the promise in Christ Jesus. Second Corinthians 5 takes it one step further to remind us that we are not just stewards of the mysteries of God, but ambassadors of God and reconciliation:

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

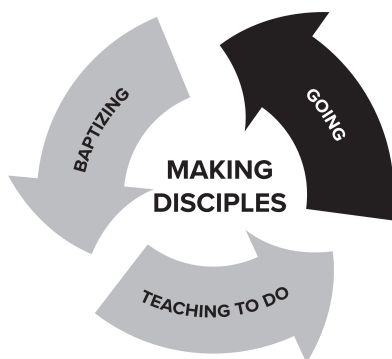
So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's

sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:14–19)

The Lord has taken us out of darkness, sin brokenness and deadness to bring us into union with Him through Jesus Christ in this thing we call the family of God. Friends with God! Reconciled to God, reconciling with one another. What a glorious ministry the Lord has. We are not engaged in mission impossible. We are engaged in God's great mission. When we are engaged in God's mission, God Himself makes anything possible.

GOD'S METHOD: GOING, BAPTIZING, TEACHING

In our call to be disciples, we should also be disciple makers. When Jesus called Peter, James, and John to leave their fishing nets to follow Him, He also told them, "From now on you will catch men." True disciples always seek to reach and disciple others.

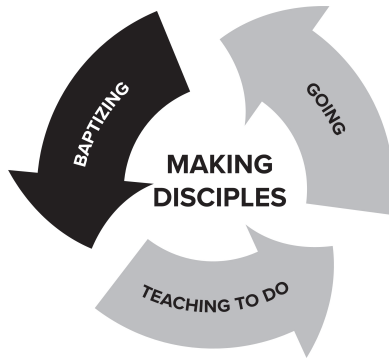


Going. Three concrete actions are necessary to make disciples. The first is to go to the ethne. We will not accomplish the

Lord's mission if we sit at home. The Lord says, "Go! Go to the sin-broken, sin-dead people around you with the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ because that is what the Lord did when He met you." We need not fear disobedient, rebellious people out there because Jesus is able to remold their hearts and lives after His likeness.

All of us have a mission field, sometimes even in our own households. Take a piece of paper and write down the names of the people in your home or extended family who are still strangers to Jesus. They are part of your ethne. Then add to the list the names of your neighbors, even those with whom you may have conflict. They are part of your ethne. Then add your coworkers or your fellow students at school. Not all of us are called to leave our homes and go to distant places; but all of us, as believers in Jesus, are called to share what God has done in our lives with those around us so they can also be introduced to the King of resurrection life. To these we are called to go!





Baptizing. Second, we are called to baptize disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Lord wants us to do more than just tell people about Jesus; He wants us to bring people to Jesus so that they embrace Him. Many people hear and do not believe, but we must continue sharing the gospel until they have embraced Jesus. This is distinctly expressed through baptism.

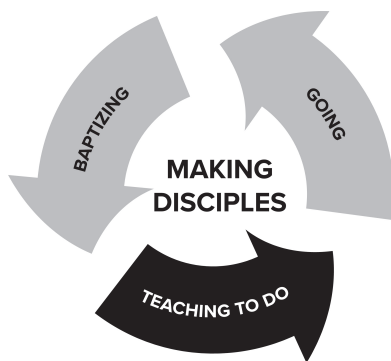
In Acts 2, when Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ on the day of Pentecost, he didn't just sit down after he preached. He urged and pleaded with the people to flee this wicked and perverse generation and embrace Jesus in faith. Without Him, he told them, no life was promised: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (2:38). That day, three thousand people repented, crossed the line, and said, "I have decided to follow Jesus." They were then baptized (see 2:41).

Baptism lays before us the challenge of being publicly identified with Jesus. In our own day, it is popular to say that a person can be a follower of Jesus in private. You can accept Jesus in the

privacy of your own home and the quietness of your own heart. But the Bible tells us that salvation doesn't stop there. It says that we should stand up and be counted to be publicly identified with Jesus.

In New Testament times, that meant going down to the river in full view of everyone. Believers didn't just stand there and watch other believers get baptized. It was the whole town! Getting baptized was not a popular thing to do. People were inviting all the forces of opposition down on themselves by saying publicly, "I have decided to follow Jesus." But Jesus tells us, "Whoever publicly acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God. But whoever disowns me before others will be disowned before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8–9).

The mission to make disciples is not complete simply by going out and witnessing about Christ. We must work to incorporate those who respond into the local body of believers. The point of entry for people who are new to the faith is baptism. It is there that the believer declares his or her intention to follow Christ.



Teaching to obey Christ's commands. The Lord really separates the wheat from the chaff in the third action we are to take as disciple makers. Besides going, besides baptizing people into the body of Christ, we are also called to teach people to observe or obey all that the Lord has commanded.

Obedience goes hand in hand with faith and repentance in Jesus Christ. People come to Jesus so they can be forgiven for their sins but also so they can follow after Him in His life. It means going where He goes, speaking as He speaks, doing as He does. When people turn from sin to Jesus, He says to them, "Come, follow me . . . and I will send you out to fish for people" (Mark 1:17).

The gospel's work is not complete in our lives when we simply embrace Jesus in faith. We must embrace Jesus in faith so that our lives are clearly characterized by obedience to Jesus. He doesn't tell us to go and teach them something *about* Him or His commands. He says that we are to teach them to *do* His commands.

Parents know the difficulties of this challenge. It is one thing for children to know what their parents have asked them to do; it is another thing for them to actually do it. It takes a lot of work to move from giving a command to working obedience into the lives of children so that when they hear a command, they do it. In our work of disciple making, God says that it is not enough to teach people what the commands are, as awesome a task as that is. People must learn to obey the commands that God has given. This is where we separate the infants in the faith from the more mature believers. We like to think the first words babies learn to say will be "Mommy" or "Daddy," but it's usually "no!" Oftentimes believers, when they hear the commands of God, say no!

Our mission to make disciples is not complete until the baptized learns to do the commands of the Lord. Scripture is consistent in insisting on obedience for disciples. In John 14:15 Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (ESV). In First Peter 1:2, writing to God’s elect, Peter says that we “have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood.” John, in First John 2:3, says, “We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands.” Paul writes to the Ephesians, “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10). Finally, in Hebrews 5:8–9 we read, “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

Hebrews 5:13–14 sums it up clearly: Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Disciples are people whose whole lives have turned from sin and are redirected to faith and obedience to Jesus.

THE MINISTRY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

There is the mission—to make disciples. There is the message—the gospel of Jesus Christ. There is the method—going, baptizing, and teaching to obey. Finally, there is the promise of God Himself living with us. Jesus finishes His Great Commission by saying, “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). This is the promise of the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

This passage has always caused me to ponder what Jesus meant. Just prior to ascending to heaven, Jesus told His disciples, “Don’t be afraid as you go and share the gospel, because I will be with you.” Then almost immediately, He rose up into the clouds and was gone, not to return until the Second Coming! What was up? Was that an idle promise? Did He mean the promise or didn’t He?

He meant it. But the promise is one to be pondered. John 14–17 helps us with this, because in these chapters Jesus tells us over and over that it is a good thing that He died, rose from the dead, and was going to ascend to heaven because then He would send us His Holy Spirit. Listen to what he says: “The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (14:26).

He goes on to teach that the Spirit will testify about Jesus.

When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. (16:8–11)

Because Jesus has ascended, the Spirit has come. He leads the way in the disciple-making mission of the church. In John 16, Jesus delineates this spiritual leadership.

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. (John 16:12–15)

Finally, when Paul was in prison, he wrote to the Philippian church to encourage them to keep sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was not a ministry of despair. It was not a mission impossible. It was the intention of God Himself.

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:4–6)

You see what the Lord was saying? He commits Himself to continue His work in us and through us until we grow up to be like Jesus in obedience. God commits Himself to us until the end. God is not done with us yet. He is continuing the sanctifying work of the Spirit in our lives until He brings us to completion, until each and every one of us is like the Savior Himself.

NOT MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

You're probably thinking, every man, woman, and child of the millions (or hundreds or thousands) in our city? Really? Yes, really. It isn't all that great a barrier if each disciple reaches just one new person each year. Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators ministry, argued that disciple making is the missing dynamic in much of today's evangelism, which tends to highlight the initial decision of a believer while not engaging in the lifelong ministry of disciple making.¹

If you were the only believer in Philadelphia today, you could reach and disciple everybody in this place in just twenty-one and a half years. In fact, we could reach and disciple the world's entire population in just thirty-four years if each one of us were to reach and disciple one person each year. It can be done if we will just do the joyful work of making disciples of each and every new believer and teaching them to be disciple makers themselves.