

The Great Commission

Dr. Jay Zinn • River's Edge Church • 10/18/09

Last week I began a series about the Great Commission and shared some demographic statistics about the number of evangelical believers in America since 1927.

In his book, "The Bridger Generation," Thom S. Rainer shared the results of a 1997 survey he conducted which estimated the proportion of each generation reached for Christ over four generations. That survey revealed the following:

1927-1945: **BUILDER** – 65% evangelical believers
1946-1964: **BOOMER** – 35% evangelical believers
1965-1983: **BUSTER** – 16% evangelical believers
1984-current: **BRIDGER** – 4% evangelical believers

The point I made with this information is that the American church has fallen short of fulfilling the great commission Jesus gave us to produce and make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). We've invested man hours and money into the institution of the church, yet, given the statistics above, have failed to effectively reproduce ourselves in others.

In my first message I went through Old Testament illustrations of God's commission to his creation to reproduce and *multiply* itself in the vegetation kingdom, the animal kingdom, the sea kingdom, and the human race (Genesis 1:11-12, 22, 24; 2:26-28). After the flood, God told Noah and his family to be *fruitful* and *increase* in number; *multiply* on earth and *increase* upon it (Genesis 9:7).

God had told Abraham that he and Sarah's descendants would *increase* and *multiply*; and that kings and nations would come from them (Genesis 17:1-8, 15; 18:18-19). God told Israel as a nation that they were chosen to be a special people, a kingdom of priests for the nations to bring them to God. But they failed in their assignment and did not bring salvation to the earth; they had not reproduced themselves in the people of the world but rather gave birth to the wind (Isaiah 26:18).

At the end of Moses' life, he commanded the people to teach their children about God and his commands when they got up, went to bed, walked by the way, and sat at the table. They were to disciple their children to reproduce and perpetuate an understanding and knowledge and love for their only true God who had brought them out of Egypt to their homeland (Deuteronomy 6-8; 10:12-11:25).

Joshua, a disciple and successor to Moses, warned the people to choose to serve God's purposes and plans for them as a nation (Joshua 24). They failed in this, however, because they didn't maintain the discipling of their children and left them vulnerable to the subtle enticements of other gods from neighboring countries. Soon after Joshua died, and the elders that outlived him had died, a whole generation grew up *not knowing the Lord*. As a result, fell into cycles over 265 years of oppression by the nations of the gods they lusted after (Judges 2:10-23). They failed to stay loyal to God and fulfill their destiny because they quit discipling their offspring and *reproducing* their "spiritual" seed.

Our God is an investor who expects an increase and return on his investment. As LeRoy Eims illustrates in his book, "The Lost Art of Disciple Making" 1978 (p. 60), money and man hours invested into a shoe manufacturing plant should produce *shoes* as well as an increase for the investor. In the same way, if Jesus commissioned his church to make disciples and then invests money and human resources into it, could he not reasonably expect the church to produce disciples? Of course. But like the children of Israel, who were given land, houses, food, livestock, a homeland, a legal system, a religious system, and the blessing of an almighty God, we, too,

have failed as a church in America and are about to acquire a whole generation of offspring who will have grown up *not knowing the Lord*.

We have failed to produce disciples. We have been too busy about doing organized church, having programs and services and events to attract the crowds. Instead of disciples we have been busy about producing audiences in the same way restaurants produce patrons. As long as the food is good, the service is excellent, the atmosphere inviting, and we have a menu that meets all tastes, then they'll keep coming back until that they find a better menu down the street. We feed people, yes, but we multiply consumers rather than cooks. The church multiplies temporary and fickle patrons, but not committed disciples.

No wonder the political climate has changed to swing over the last four generations to an emerging generation that sees nothing wrong with our nation's ungodly and liberal worldview. They have been left vulnerable to go after the enticing gods of secular humanism in all its forms. They have not been taught the ways of the Lord sufficiently enough to withstand the onslaught of deception behind the gold, the glitter, and the glory of the gods of other religions, philosophies, and antichristal systems.

So what can we do when the juggernaut is in motion amidst an American population increasingly hostile to the roots of a nation founded under God? One answer is "discipleship." It isn't a quick fix, but neither did we get to where we are overnight. The nation's moorings have been eroding over the last four generations and the church's fascination with money, prosperity, fame, and self-absorption needs to change. We oppose abortion, yes, but have unwittingly performed "spiritual" abortions among untold hundreds of thousands of new births in Christ. Many of the conversions that have happened since 1927 became *stillbirths* by neglect. Perhaps because the church has failed to provoke the saints to take time from ourselves and busy lives and invest into baby Christians.

We've assisted in their birth, yes, but instead of taking them home to grow and be fed and nurtured to maturity, we've left them out on the street for Satan to come along and snatch them away; then disciple them in *his* ways through television and a hostile educational system towards the Creator.

We must be the first to repent and not wait on the church to do what *we* can do *ourselves*, along with the help of the Holy Spirit. It isn't only your pastor or spiritual leader's job to reproduce disciples; we've all been given the same spiritual reproductive abilities to reproduce as they are supposed to do. We *all* have the "Seed" of Christ in us. We are *all* children of Abraham through faith. We *all* have a spiritual womb to give birth with. We *all* have enough knowledge of the Holy One and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to help us to teach and pass on to new converts the same things that have sustained you and me when we were young.

You don't have to be a spiritual giant to invest in a longstanding relationship with someone new in the Lord who needs a coach, a mentor, a big brother or sister who will see them through the vulnerable stages on to maturity and the ability to feed and clothe and provide their own shelter in the Lord. They, in turn, will live by your example and carry on the business of reproducing and multiplying. God will then bless the increase and be very pleased with the return you've delivered on his investment.

This pleasure of the investor is illustrated in the parable of the talents. Two of the servants given an investment created a return of twice as much as they had received (Matthew 25:14-30). They were commended and rewarded for their efforts because they were faithful in what had been given to them. He gave each one an amount in keeping with each servant's ability. As Christ's servants today, we are able and equipped with what we have, so don't bury what's been given to you as the one servant who hid his talent and brought no return. He was regarded by the investor as wicked, lazy, and worthless (Matthew 26:24-30).

God is totally about “increase” on his investments. He’s given us a foundation in Christ and wants us to build upon that foundation and the fire will test us to see in the end how well we did with what God invested into us; how much increase we brought through discipleship (1 Corinthians 3:8-15). Increase in numbers of disciples that are *sustainable* and *enduring* is what God is after. It is one thing to be the spiritual “midwife” assisting in the birth of a new convert, but it is another to be sure that your fruit remains.

Two things amplify this for us in John 15 where Jesus refers to himself as *the vine* and us as the **branches**. He declares that IF we are truly connected to the vine, that is, cling to him and live in him like sticky tape...then we will automatically produce fruit. To be close to the heart of Jesus is to be close to the life he demonstrated.

Jesus proudly says to his Father, before his crucifixion, that he *lost none* of the men God gave him to disciple, except Judas who was the one chosen specifically to betray him (John 17:11-26). In truth, Jesus was able to keep the eleven because he *discipled* them over a period of three plus years. He even prays for their protection in the garden and for those they will reproduce after them. Jesus brought fruit to the Father. He was a faithful Son who kept, taught, and protected the disciples from the evil one. His prayer in John 17 was for the disciples to follow his example. And as long as they did, their fruit would remain, and it did. The church grew and expanded as God gave the increase through a culture of discipleship.

I would like to conclude with some thoughts on another parable that has “discipleship” written all over it. Let’s look at **Matthew 13:1-9**:

“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: **“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop — a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.”** NIV

Jesus goes on to interpret this parable in **Matthew 13:18-23**:

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” NIV

Now like many of you, I’ve read and interpreted this parable over the years in this way:

“When an evangelist has a crusade and sows the seed of the gospel message, it falls on hard impenetrable hearts and the devil comes along and snatches away what was sown into his heart. Or it will fall on rocky places which lasts only a short time because the roots can’t go deep enough to sustain life. Or it falls among the thorns of the cares and

riches of this world that choke out what was sown. Or it will fall, Praise God, on a tilled heart that has been prepared by the Holy Spirit to receive and grow fruit.”

Sound familiar? This has been the way I’ve heard it preached and understood for years until my recent wake up call about discipleship. To see this as I just described it is the same thing as saying we give birth to babies and then throw them out of the hospital and into the street to see which one survives and which one doesn’t. One will die first. Another will live a little longer, but eventually dies. Another will live even longer, but only until they get caught up into the cares and riches of this world and dies. But, Praise God, the fourth one will actually survive, grow up, marry, and reproduce others who will be survivors like the one who survived. So that means only one out of four who hears the gospel will make it.

That’s the way I used to see it. But now I see this parable differently. The old way puts all the responsibility on God to protect, mature and grow up the new converts and that he chooses one out of four to make it while he stands by to let the other three fall away. That’s how we would have to see it, but it is not true. God said that if *we* don’t take care and provide for *our own* we are worse than infidels (1 Timothy 5:8). What parent would do such a thing to their new born? No one. God is an even greater parent than us. What parent would give birth to a child and then turn it loose in the streets to fend for itself or die? How awful to think about, yet, is this not what the church has done to new converts over the last four generations? *We*, not God, have deserted the new converts. We evangelize them, get them in the door, and then leave them on the side of the road to figure out how to serve God by just coming to church and listen to preaching. We don’t teach them how to pray, how to hear from God, or how to read, study, and meditate on the scriptures. We don’t protect them and carry them through those first three types of soil. We leave them vulnerable to the enemy, the world, and the “ism” predators.

I now believe that it isn’t God’s responsibility to make new converts into 30-fold, 60-fold, or 100-fold fruit-producing Christians, it is OUR responsibility. We were left in this world to *reproduce* mature Christians, not stillborns. We are to protect them and keep the devil from *snatching* that seed from their hearts. We are to pull out the *rocks* that threaten to block their access to the water of the Word and of the Holy Spirit so that the sun will not scorch them. We are to warn them of the enticing *thorns* of the world and show them how they can overcome temptations and find solid covering and protection from the allurements of the cares and riches of this life.

Once we help them through those first three tests and dangers...we can bring them to the fourth type of soil that has been tilled enough in their hearts to receive the seed that will actually produce a harvest, an increase, a multiplication of other disciples. That’s what I now believe this parable means. It is MY job to take those whom God gives me and be a spiritual parent to them until they mature to become a parent themselves, a discipler of other new converts. This is the *increase* God is looking for in our lives. To bear fruit and make sure that *that* fruit is cultivated enough to survive the onslaught of the enemy and his all-out-war to snuff out that new life in Christ.

When a nation begins to abort its children it aborts its *future* producers. It stops the growth and increase of other producers. It stagnates and diminishes the years of longevity that nation could have had if it had not aborted its children. This is why the church of America has 4% or less of evangelical believers. It’s created amazing restaurants of fast food or fine dining, but it hasn’t produced disciples to carry new births through the first three types soil to the tilled ground of the good soil.

We must repent and get back to the great commission. The great commission isn’t to make new converts, you can’t “make” a convert. We can’t convert anyone. Only God can make a convert. But we have been commissioned to *turn His new converts into disciples of Jesus* who will multiply a harvest that lasts and will not fade away for future generations to come.

In a nation enamored by instant success and pleasures without cost, we will never invest in the most important thing Jesus told us to do, we will merely settle for the present appetite like Esau who thought only of his meal today. We will only seek out that sermon that tingles but doesn't challenge what matters most...*to reproduce after our kind*: to be servants who invest our talents into the souls of men, women and children so that *they* will become parents who care about what happens to the child *after* they are born. Who will take the newborns home, feed them, train them, spend time with them, pray with them, and love them until they leave home to start and perpetuate their own family. It's God's plan. *Increase* is the mantra of the American church. But it is an increase of new converts, it's an increase of "transfer" growth from other churches. The type of *increase* God is after is acquired only through discipleship, but sadly has become a "lost art" in the church built only for audiences. Jesus was not commissioned by his Father to keep the masses. He was commissioned to disciple eleven men who changed the world forever. Are you up for the task? Then find your new convert and disciple make them a disciple of Jesus.

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