
The relevance of disciple-making to the church in a post-Christian age

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Abstract

The church, as a result of the accomplished work of Christ, has a specific and clear commission, namely to make disciples of all nations. This follows the pioneering work done by the early church, which was successful and faithful to its calling during the first few centuries. Despite persecution, being dispersed and even killed for their faith, the early church pressed forward to bring the good news to the world. The commission seemed to have become a lifestyle where they could not help but speak about Jesus to all they came in contact with. This study investigates the position of the modern church in carrying forward the zeal and commitment of the early church to make disciples. Surveys done on this topic showed some alarming trends that point to the negation of the commission, and replacement strategies used to substitute for this calling. Making disciples seemed not to be a priority for a substantial number of evangelical churches, which resulted in the disempowerment and ignorance of church members who lacked in confidence to share their faith. Despite the development of the church over the ages, the intrinsic nature of the church to make disciples did not change. The church and believers must rediscover their calling of making disciples and incorporate principles of the early church to do what they are called to do.

Opsomming

Die kerk het die opdrag ontvang om dissipels te maak van alle nasies. Die vroeë Christelike kerk het hierdie opdrag getrou uitgevoer gedurende die eerste paar eeue. Nieteenstaande vervolging en teenstand, selfs die aflegging van hulle lewens in diens van die evangelie, het hulle die boodskap bly voortdra. Dit blyk dat die evangelie en verlossing deur die soendood van Christus 'n leefwyse was wat hulle nie anders kon nie as om te deel met almal met wie hulle in aanraking gekom het. Hierdie studie ondersoek die praktyk van dissipelmaking in die evangeliese kerke teen die agtergrond van die vroeë christelike kerk en op grond van verskeie opnames in die verband word bevind dat daar 'n ernstige agterweelating daarvan is in baie kerke. Verder dat die praktyk om dissipels te maak aangepas is of vervang is met hedendaagse alternatiewe. Hierdie toedrag van sake het gelei tot die ontmoediging, ontmagtiging en beskroomdheid van gelowiges om hulle geloof met ander te deel. Desteenstaande die ontwikkeling van die vroeë kerk oor die eeue bly die instrinsieke natuur en funksie van die kerk onveranderlik. Die kerk en gelowiges moet opnuut hulle roeping herontdek en met erns opneem, terwyl die beginsels en metodes van die vroeë kerk geïnkorporeer kan word.

Keywords:

evangelize, disciple-making, early Christian church, seeker-sensitive churches

Slutelwoorde:

evangeliseer, vroeë Christelike kerk, dissipelmaking, soeker-vriendelike kerke

1. Introduction

When the disciples received the great commission “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19-20) the immediate implication is that it would start with proclaiming the good news, followed by more lasting actions to ensure that those who received the good news may be established in the full meaning of being disciples. Making disciples includes a process not only for the conversion of non-Christians into the Christian fold but also as “a continuous process by which after conversion, the Christian is continually

nurtured into spiritual adulthood and grounded in the faith” (Ogunewu, 2014: 71). A lasting encounter with those who received and accepted the gospel is foreseen in reaching this goal, but also to replicate the process of making disciples. Making disciples has never been an easy process and has always faced opposition, difficulty, and required courage and boldness in the face of it. Bolsinger (2015), a Presbyterian minister in the USA, addressed a group of Methodist Christian Educators in Maine about the Kingdom of God and the community. During question time, the one question that came up from almost everyone was: “How can we keep our church from dying?” The reason for these pastors’ questions stems from their uncertainty about whether they are still relevant in ministry despite all their labor in the church; they find themselves at a place where they no longer know what to do (Bolsinger, 2015: par2). There seems to be a sense that “[they] are in uncharted terrain trying to lead mostly dying churches into a post-Christian culture that now considers the church as an optional, out of touch and irrelevant relic of the past”. A survey done by Barna (2020) confirms this trend. In 2000, 45% of believers indicated that they were practicing Christians, and in 2019, only 25% confirmed that they were practicing Christians. On the question of where the practicing Christians have gone, it seems that they either became non-practicing Christians, up from 25% in 2000 to 35% in 2020, or non-Christians, up from 20% in 2000 to 30% in 2019.

Christians in the post-Christian world are surrounded by a secular culture that, through its different divisions, deliberately works against the message of the Bible. The question this study will investigate is whether the church has lost ground because it has lost its zeal for making disciples and moved away from what it is called to do because of cultural pressure.

2. The evangelical church’s view on disciple-making

A determining factor, at least for evangelicals who hold to the importance of the “born-again” experience and the strong belief that the gospel of salvation must be continually spread across the world because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is whether their faithfulness and obedience to the Great Commission have wavered.

2.1 Some beliefs on “making disciples” in evangelical churches in a post-Christian age

It seems that there has been a shift over time not only in how to make disciples but also in the importance of it to the church. The first mentioned

“how to make disciples” for some does not mean finding more effective means to spread the gospel, but that such an approach should aim at making the gospel less offensive and more tolerant for the unbeliever. Some others argue that the importance or relevance of making disciples pertained only to the disciples who received the great commission and for a specific period. They would further argue that the accompanying works of power of the gospel have ceased, and in essence, the presentation of the gospel has changed. Another belief is that God chooses who He saves not based on their merit, but out of his kindness and sovereign will, and it is based on God’s foreknowledge of who would come to faith in the future. God’s offer of salvation must not be offered to unbelievers, the lost, in an indiscriminate manner that assures them of God’s love and willingness to forgive if they repent (Olsen, 2015). A proponent from this position cannot say, “God loves you, Christ died for you, and you are invited to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, and if you do, you will be saved.” “God’s offer of forgiveness through Christ is not a ‘well-meant offer’ except to the elect” (Olsen, 2015). The belief that no human knows who God has chosen inevitably changes the dynamic of evangelism and disciple-making. The aforementioned views inevitably beg the question of what effect it has on disciple-making today compared to the early church.

2.2 Evangelical churches and Believers’ stance on disciple-making

Different surveys conducted mostly in the USA and some in Britain, included in this study, indicated the following, however, not exhaustive trends amongst evangelicals concerning sharing their faith with non-believers:

- Ignorance of believers about the Great Commission is reported on by the World Metrics Report 2024. Barna (2018) indicated that 51% of churchgoers are not familiar with the fundamental term in Evangelism, the ‘Great Commission’, and only 64% of Evangelicals believe evangelism is extremely important.
- Believers are fearful to share their faith because they will be rejected, feel unequipped, and believe that it is disrespectful and judgmental, or because the unbeliever is not interested in hearing about Jesus. The Jesus Film Project (2020) surveyed thousand six hundred people. When asked the question why they did not share their faith with unbelievers 22% indicated because of fear; another 10% felt unequipped to share their faith and another 8% feared rejection and hostility if they should share their faith with unbelievers; also that unbelievers were not interested to hear about

Jesus. In 2018, the top reason why believers were not sharing their faith was because it was “disrespectful and judgmental” (Barna, 2018).

- Others believe it is important to share their faith, but are unequipped to answer difficult questions; they would rather not share their faith and trust that the church is equipped to do this. The Talking Jesus Project in the UK in 2022 reported that 75% of those questioned agreed that it is a Christian responsibility to share their faith and feel confident to do that. However, 40% of those say they do not feel confident to answer difficult questions and therefore do not share their faith. On the other hand, 80% agree or strongly agree that their church offers events and services that are suitable for non-Christians and therefore they feel confident to invite non-Christians along placing the responsibility to share the Christian faith on the church leaders (Talking Jesus Report, 2022:22). When practicing Christians were asked if it is the churches’ job to convert unbelievers in 1993 10% said yes and in 2018 when asked the same question 29% agreed (Barna, 2018).
- The conviction that the gospel conflicts with modern culture. According to the Pew Research Centre (2024), the view that religious beliefs (that would include Christianity) are responsible for a ‘great’ or ‘some’ conflict with the modern culture in the USA rose from 42% in 2020 to 48% in 2024. As a result, the view that it is best not to discuss religion with somebody who disagrees with you went up from 33% in 2019 to 41% in 2024.
- The views on making disciples and sharing one’s faith are not the only aspect that shows a decline, but so is church attendance. Faith Communities Today (FACT, 2020) in the United States surveyed more than 15 000 religious congregations across the United States just before the pandemic lockdown and found a median decline in attendance of 7% between 2015 and 2020. There has also been a drop in weekend attendance of half of the countries 350 000 religious congregations from 137 in 2000 to 65 in 2021. This is also the case for ‘mainline’ Protestant groups as well as theologically conservative groups; there is a decline across the board.

If the above statistics, mostly obtained from the USA through different surveys, can be counted on, they communicate some disheartening information about Christianity and its decline, more of its neglect to obey its calling. Unfortunately, these statistics in all likelihood represent a much wider occurrence across the world. A substantial number of believers or church members are ignorant, fearful, unequipped, or in conflict with modern culture. No doubt that “some research shows that the U.S. population is

undergoing major religious, social, demographic, and digital change. The rise of digital life, including social media, the economic crisis, changing attitudes about social issues, and the emergence of younger generations on the scene are some of the factors that are likely to form undercurrents recalibrating Americans' [but also global Christian believers] connection to faith and Christianity" (Barna, 2018, par. 27). Many contradicting messages on Christian doctrine presented by some influencers with substantial following on social media platforms confuse believers. The influence of modern culture seems to have an altering effect on the core Christian practices, leading to a neglect of evangelism. A survey of churches held in Canada pointed out that 65% of church leaders say that "evangelism has not been a priority for their congregations over the last several years; only 9% said it was a priority in their church (White, 2021:par.6). This seems to be a wider trend than just in the USA. What is more disturbing is that churches (at least a great number of them) stopped intentionally planning to reach the lost and, in essence, planned to fail at making disciples and disobey the Great Commission – Matthew 28:19-20. Almost half of the Evangelical churches in the USA do not have evangelism as a functional priority of their church, which might have contributed to the state of the world today. One evident reason for this decline is that the distinctness and confronting nature of the gospel were causing an uncomfortable position for many churches, leading to the introduction of so-called seeker-friendly churches that adapt the service and selective doctrine on Sunday to rather appeal to and not offend the unbeliever. The gospel is meant to be distinct from culture, it is meant to be salt and light.

It is fair to say that pressure from outside the church is a dominant force that contributes to an alteration of the practice in reaching the unbeliever. Unfortunately, it exposes another more serious tendency in some churches to align the message of the Bible with modern culture, denying the absolute authority of the Bible.

2.3 Biblical justification to amend the message for disciple-making in modern times?

Is the belief and practice by many modern-day evangelical churches to amend the presentation and content of the gospel in reaching unbelievers biblically founded? One such approach or deviation is known as seeker-friendly churches. This approach may discourage intentional disciple-making, planned strategies by the church to reach the unsaved, and casual disciple-making – the engagement of believers in their everyday walk to share their faith. The liturgy and messages in these churches on Sundays seem to fulfill the role of disciple-making. Combining intentional and casual sharing of the

gospel in one event. Although the structure of the service may be intended and casual to reach the unbeliever, it deviates from the core message and confronting nature of the gospel. Simington (2018 par.1) defines the seeker-friendly or seeker-sensitive church movement as those churches that “seek to gear their services to the unsaved by making them attractive, non-threatening, entertaining, and relevant to their perceived needs. It is a consumer-driven approach to church, employing savvy marketing strategies and preaching an appealing, modified gospel.” This model has been exemplified by Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church and has been adopted by thousands of churches worldwide.

Simington (2018) points out some important presumptions of this approach: Church structures are “old school” and prevent unbelievers from finding God, and must thus be altered.

The gospel message is too complex and not understandable to the unbeliever. The complex doctrine, creeds, and weighty theological concepts must be left out on Sunday for the sake of unbelievers. These can be dealt with at midweek meetings when Christians meet.

The gospel message must be rescued from its foolishness and presented in another form that will not be interpreted by the unsaved as foolishness (1 Cor 1:18).

Gimmicks or business and marketing strategies must be used to attract the unsaved. Through means such as music, displays on stage, programs, audiovisuals, coffee shops, and welcoming teams.

Increasing numbers in attendance mark growth.

An evaluation of these presumptions leads to the conclusion that each one of them is unbiblical. Firstly the Bible is clear that no man of his own will seeks God (Rom 3:11) but is in a fallen state, dead in their trespasses and spiritually hardened (Col 2:13, Eph 2:1-3 and Eph 4:18). Secondly the Bible says that spiritual things cannot be known by the carnal human unless revealed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:14), thirdly that the natural and unsaved human will see the gospel message as foolish but that does not necessitate the altering of the gospel; nor that it is not true and that the preaching thereof must not continue (1 Cor 1:23). Fourthly in Paul’s outreaches, he did not use convincing tactics but spoke in humbleness with fear and trembling (1 Cor 2:1-5) believing that the gospel in itself driven by the Holy Spirit has the power to save (Rom 1:16). Lastly numbers is not necessarily an indication of growth since many may just come for the amusement without committing their life to Christ. Jesus also pointed out his false followers who came just because they were

fed (John 6:26-27). Although the church is deemed to grow, one needs to be cautious to assume that an increase in numbers equates to growth because it may be the good entertainment the church offers that does not necessarily indicate spiritual growth or acceptance of Christ as savior (Simington, 2018).

Support for the seeker-sensitive approach is found in the writings of the apostle Paul, who said, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity" (Col. 4:5). Does acting wise and making the most of every opportunity equate to altering or watering down the gospel? The intention here is that every opportunity to converse with unbelievers is precious, and the believer's conduct must be such as not to hurt them or to do harm to the gospel of Christ. Making most of the time afforded "to walk cautiously and with circumspection, to give them no advantage against you, nor expose yourselves to their malice and ill will". Let your speech and deeds be discreet and seasonable. It does not mean that if needed, even the gospel message can be altered, but instead that a believer must act with grace, although it may not always be of grace (Henry, 1953:767). Mittelberg (1996) points out that the seeker movement is authentic in reaching unbelievers and turning them into fully devoted followers of Christ. Based on what Paul said, "I have become all things to all people... for the sake of the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:22-23). The key element of the phrase according to Mittelberg (1996) is to proclaim the gospel while remaining true to the commitment of pleasing God, not people (Gal. 1:10). "One of the primary ways to please God is to raise the priority of finding lost men and women, who matter deeply to Him, and to present His message to them in understandable terms, using relevant illustrations and effective modes of communication. All of this is intended to remove unnecessary barriers and help these people in their journey toward Christ" (Mittelberg, 1996: par. 5). Mittelberg's explanation seems honest, but it still does not justify any alteration to the gospel. Is this approach genuinely focused on reaching the unbeliever or on growing the church? Let us assume it is the first mentioned. "To become all things to all people" does not mean that Paul suggested or taught that the true gospel must be softened, but rather signified the sacrifices a believer should be willing to make to reach the unsaved. This could include a willingness to set one's esteem aside and be willing to be ridiculed, falsely accused, mocked, or labeled if, through that, some may be saved. In his desire to win souls, he acted with the wisdom and sympathy taught by experience, suppressing himself. He would sacrifice his legitimate interest and preferences completely if thereby he could save some (Guthrie et al., 1970:1063). He could never give up the rights of God but could resign his own and very often did for the good of others (Henry, 1953:552). It is clear when Paul was accused that he did things to please men he denied

it claiming that in doing that he would no longer be a bondservant of Christ (Gal. 1:10). Despite Mittelberg's defense that seeker-sensitive churches remain truthful to the gospel, in reality, this approach is defined by loaded terms such as "understandable terms", "relevant illustrations", "effective modes of communication" and "unnecessary barriers" that seem to do the opposite. The basis of the approach assumes that the message of the Bible is incomprehensible, irrelevant, and troublesome. Effective communication methods seem to point to communication more aligned with the standards of culture. Little or no room is left for the conviction of the Holy Spirit. In essence, these terms no longer only suggest the proclamation of the truth but also the necessity of a certain level of "unauthorized" human intervention in the salvation of humankind.

Groothuis (1994), on the other hand, admits that although Christianity can be privately engaging and socially irrelevant, and does not count as it should. Also, seeker-sensitive churches are growing while it seems that other churches are dying. Growth in these churches is impressive and seems to be adhering to the call to expand. The danger of this approach, however, is that such zeal to grow the church and to keep it from dying can lead to amending whatever is needed to attract people through a common denominator. Giving people what they want is in direct opposition to what God's will is for them and sacrifices biblical integrity (Guinness, 1994). Groothuis (1996) points out three reasons against the seeker movement. Firstly, the approach to reach people through entertainment-oriented culture dishonors the gravity, depth, and substance of biblical truth. Secondly, marketing that is used to meet an audience's existing desires or create new desires to sell a product can be unethical and biased. "Marketing typically appeals to selfishness, covetousness, vanity, and fear. It is the science of psychological manipulation for economic ends". Lastly, "the use of contemporary music and drama in worship can diminish the appreciation of God's transcendent holiness, especially if it is presented as a performance for spectators instead of as an offering to God" (Groothuis, 1996: par.7, 9).

Another danger of seeker-sensitive churches is that the work of the Holy Spirit in convicting of sin, righteousness, and judgment is being replaced by manmade institutions and methods relying on materialistic results lacking spiritual depth. Adapting the message of the gospel to be more appealing to the unbeliever can be equated to bringing another gospel that Paul alluded to in the letter to the Galatians. The premise of the seeker-friendly approach begs the question of whether the church and what it has developed into through human intervention is indeed what God intended it to be. If it has developed into something else, it was meant to be the so-called corrective

approach by the seeker-friendly churches in another attempt by humans to rectify what they have done wrong, and in so doing, they stumble further. Such an approach to reaching the unreached is not biblical and not acceptable. Furthermore, no man can change God's word to suit humans but must submit to the word of God to change and save them. Watering down the word of God makes it powerless.

The seeker-sensitive approach, however, presented as well meant does not meet God's standard. The church, meaning the corporate body of believers, can never escape being the bearer of the good news, which will be offensive to some, even a stumbling block. The church stands as a beacon for that truth. Whether clergy or members are aware or not, the public watches the church to see how it acts and what it says in this world. And it is the church's distinctness, not sameness, to the world that draws unbelievers. The church may not be anything else than what God called it to be, otherwise it will be reflecting a twisted, powerless message and picture of God (Pope-Levison, 2023).

3. Disciple-making and Evangelism

It is important to distinguish between evangelism and disciple-making. Although the term evangelism is used to refer to sharing the gospel with unbelievers, it is only part of the commission to make disciples.

3.1 What does it mean to make disciples

What is meant by the phrase 'make disciples' (Matt 28:19)? Making disciples entails more than just evangelising. The Greek word used, μαθητεύσατε, is an aorist imperative verb, thus a command that can be translated as "go and make disciples". This command signals clearly that it is not only about making converts who believe in the sacrificial work of Christ but also instructing and teaching them to observe all the things Jesus commanded his disciples (Matt 28:20). The starting point or initiating of discipleship is the transformation and renewing of a person by the Spirit of God (Titus 3:5-6), to be transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (1 Pet 2:9; Col 1:13). This is the qualifying condition of becoming a disciple. The difference between a follower and a disciple is locked up in commitment and submission to obey the commandments of Christ. The disciples initially seemed to have followed Jesus because they were intrigued by what Jesus did and what he taught, expecting that he would establish another kingdom on earth. After Jesus' resurrection and the disciples being empowered with

the Holy Spirit, they must have realized the far-reaching effects of Jesus' instruction and their commission. The words of Jesus that they must follow him and learn to become fishers of men probably, for the first time, made sense (Matt 4:19-20). A disciple is anyone willing to be taught or to learn from another, an apprentice in this case of Jesus (Bauer, 2000). To become a disciple comprises two important elements, namely, first to believe in the cause of the instruction, in this case, the kingdom of heaven, and how to become part of it. It signifies submission to Jesus Christ and this kingdom before one can be instructed on what it means to be a disciple. Secondly, it speaks of a redirection of one's life to follow the tenets of the kingdom that became the center of one's life. Belonging to this kingdom is not merely becoming a member but rather an active representative with the calling to share the good news of salvation, responsible for a new, abundant, and eternal life as part of belonging to the kingdom of God.

It is safe to say that evangelism is the starting point of making disciples, but not the end. The term 'evangelism' is based on the Greek terms, euangelion, which means "good tidings" or 'gospel', euangelizo, which means to "preach the good news", and euangelistes, the "one who preaches good news" or 'evangelist'. McClymond (2010) explains that in the Old Testament in the Septuagint version of Isaiah 52:7-10, euangelizo portrays the powerful image of Jerusalem at war and the army fighting for them, at long last sending the messenger to announce that the army has won, God has provided the victory. This joyful message of deliverance results in a celebration. In the same sense, the word evangelism signals a joyful message of God's gracious and peaceful reign and deliverance from the oppression of sin. One can add that for a person to be saved from the wrath of God, they need to hear the good news of salvation and accept that. McKnight (2011:29) explains it as follows: "The word gospel [or the making of disciples] cannot be equated to the word salvation, which means we are salvationists. Salvation will bring a result which is not merely to know Jesus and all He has commanded, but also obedience to all Jesus commanded. It is all about a relationship with Christ (Geiger, Kelly, and Nation, 2012:18, 20). Making disciples is harder and is lifelong and gradual and not comfortable or vindicating. Billy Graham realized, later in life, that this aspect of making disciples was not happening after his Crusades and he estimated in 1990 that only 25% of those responding to the gospel at the Crusades continued living any kind of intentional Christian life of growing, serving and becoming more like Jesus (Fields, 2017). Another aspect found in the early church to ensure that new believers are established in their faith

is that a church planter would remain with that church for two to three years to teach and instruct them (Stott, 1990; Rainer, 1990).

The church is not called to and must not be obsessed with getting people to make a decision but be like the early church who were obsessed with making disciples (McKnight, 2011:18). The ultimate goal of the church is not to find ways to increase the numbers in the church but to stay true to the command to make disciples that will lead to an increase in numbers (Breen & Cockram, 2011). The gospel and the obedience or disobedience thereof have consequences and culminate in a final judgment before God and not before a human tribunal (McKnight, 2011). Making disciples is, therefore, not something the church can decide on but a lasting imperative. It is the lifeblood of the church. This is what the church is called to be and to do.

3.2 The disciples' authority and beyond to make disciples on earth?

Jesus' commission follows on his declaration that all authority in heaven and earth has been given to Him (Matt 28:18). Jesus alerts us to the different kingdoms in John 18:36 when He says that His kingdom is not of this world. Jesus' victory over sin and death led to Him being highly exalted by the Father and given a name that is above every name before which every knee shall bow in heaven and earth (Phil. 2:8-11). When the Pharisees asked Him about when His kingdom was coming, Jesus answered and said My kingdom is within you (Luke 17:20-21). He indicated that where He is, His kingdom is. Further, it also implies that where his followers are, there His kingdom is. There is a clear distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of the earth. When Jesus prayed for His disciples, He prayed not that they would be taken out of this world but that God would keep them from the evil one. And then He prays, "They are not of this world, even as I am not of this world" (Joh. 17:15-16). See also Jesus's answer to the question of paying taxes to Caesar. Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and the things to God that are God's (Mark 12:17). The plural things indicate more than just money or tax, but also obedience to civil law.

What does the testimony of Scripture say about God's authority on earth? Hamstra (1996) points out that God has established three fundamental areas where authority has been delegated to individuals, namely, civil government, the home, and the church. Citizens, including Christians, are to submit to the governing authorities (1 Peter 2:13-14). Children are to obey their parents (Ephesians 6:1-2). Believers were to honor spiritual authorities such as apostles who demanded compliance based on their commission from the Lord.

Is the authority given to governments and rulers able to dictate what people may and may not do on earth, and more specifically what Christians may or may not do regards their calling? Romans 13:1-7 and 1 Peter 2:13-16 state that “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities” and “therefore submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake to the king as supreme or to governors, as to those sent by him”. How must this authority in the Bible be understood?

The word authority does not occur that often in the Old Testament. Two Hebrew words are used: *‘toqeph’* (Esther 9:29), which means power, authority, and strength, and *‘Râbâh’* (Proverbs 29:9), to be in authority (Strong,1986). In the New Testament, the Greek word *‘exousia’* is used, and it means power and authority. There are numerous uses of the word authority in the New Testament, but the consistent belief is that there is no authority except from God (Rom 13:1, Joh 19:11). For there is no authority except God, and those which exist are established by God. “Jesus answered (Pontius Pilate), you would have no authority over me unless it had been given to you from above; for this reason, he who delivered me up to you has the greater sin.”

If any of these authorities given by God violate the trust granted by God and overstep the boundaries of authority, those belonging to the kingdom of Heaven are free and indeed mandated to “obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29) (Hamstra, 1996). In simple terms, it means “To disobey earthly authority if it forbids you to do what God commands and commands you to do what God forbids”. Several examples are found in the Bible about civil disobedience. Shiphrah and Puah, two midwives, disobeyed Pharaoh’s orders to kill the male babies (Ex 1:15-17; 21-22). When the Sanhedrin prohibited Peter and John from speaking or preaching about Jesus, they rightly replied that the Sanhedrin must decide if it is right to obey them rather than God. Then they also informed them that they know what is right and that is to speak and do what they have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20). Their answer is in such a way that they get the Sanhedrin to rethink their order in terms of how they represent the authority given to them by God. Daniel’s three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, disobeyed the order of Nebuchadnezzar to bow to the idol (Dan 3). Despite the King’s edict, Daniel continued to pray to God (Dan 6).

Important to note that in all the above examples, civil disobedience was met with repercussions and consequences that were meted out based on the laws of the kingdom of the world. That, however, is not an indication or confirmation that it is wrong in the eyes of God. Peter and the apostles ended up in jail for continuing to preach (Acts 5:17-32). But amidst it all, they were

set free by an angel and went back to teaching after the angel encouraged them to preach again.

God still exercises His authority in the spiritual realm over His church. First, the disciples were informed of this delegation of authority in Matthew 28:19 when Jesus assures His disciples that because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, He gives them the authority to make disciples. The One to whom all authority has been given sends you. By this, Jesus asserts his universal dominion as mediator. This authority was given to Him by Him who is the fountain of all being and consequently of all power (Henry, 1953:445). Authority has been given to Him to further the spread of the good tidings through those who follow Him. For the church today, that authority is set forward and delegated by the authority of the written Word.

The action of Peter summarises the response any follower of Christ should have today, namely to rather obey God when any other authority or modern-day culture demands to disobey Him or attempt to silence them about the gospel. Followers of Christ individually and in the church corporately have the authority given by Jesus to spread the gospel to make disciples. The church and its ministry possess genuine religious authority only as they serve the mission of Jesus in faithfulness to the Bible and in building up the church (Matt 28:18-20) (Denison, n.d.).

4. Gaining an understanding of early Christianity's environment in the Roman Empire, in which they shared their faith

Early Christianity, according to Guzik (2023b), can be divided into the following periods: the Apostolic church period, 33AD – 00AD, the early Christianity 100AD – 312AD, the Christian Empire, early years 312AD – 1000AD, and the Christian Empire, and later years 1000AD – 1500AD. For this study, we will focus only on the first two mentioned periods.

The social-political environment of the provinces of the Roman Empire seemed to have been orderly because of the legal system of the Romans. This period was reasonably peaceful and known as Pax Romana – the golden age of Imperialism. The Roman Trade and industry were ideal, and so was the trading of ideas wherever people connected. The common language, Koine Greek, mostly spoken in the Roman Empire, eased communication. Its religiously pluralistic policy made religious expression and worship more

accessible as long as it did not disturb the social and political order. The good infrastructure of the Roman Empire provided for easy travel. Palestine, or as it was known, Judea, was incorporated under the Roman Empire and was ruled as an occupied territory, which constituted deep resentment against Roman rule (Guzik, 2023a).

The early Christians were born into an environment of religious baggage expressed in the different branches of the Jewish religion that constituted the variances of their spiritual inheritance. The Sadducees were the dominating group around the Temple with good relations with the Romans, while the Pharisees, another dominating group, sought to keep Judaism pure from Hellenistic influences. A more radical ascetic movement was the Essenes, probably responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. Overall, there was a real expectation for the coming of the Messiah (Joh 4:25). Also, counting against the early Christians was their humble and despised start as an illegal and persecuted religion that, despite everything, still grew into a dominant force of Western and world civilization (Guzik 2023a).

Observing the different environments of the early Church, it seems that the Roman Empire was conducive, peaceful, and stable for the most part. Another positive aspect was the religious protection the early Christians enjoyed from the Roman government in the beginning. They were considered to be associated with Judaism. It seems to be logical since Jesus's followers and his apostles were Jewish, and so were the 120 in the upper room and the 3000 saved on Pentecost. In the beginning, the Jesus movement, also known as 'the way', functioned alongside Judaism and prayed and worshipped in the temple. At least for several years after the inception of the church, believers were mostly Jews. Over time, the compilation of the early church changed to include more Gentiles than Jews. The watershed that resulted in the early Christians becoming a religion on its terms came around the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, when thousands of Jews were brutally killed, while almost no Christians died because they heeded Jesus' warning in Matthew 24:15-28 to flee when they saw Jerusalem being surrounded by the enemy. When Christianity transitioned to a religion with its status and separated from Judaism, they were regarded as a *religio illicita* and illegal religion that may pose a threat to the social order. They were no longer allowed in the synagogues, and state-sponsored persecution also began because they were perceived as enemies of the human race, mainly because they refused to participate in many aspects of civic life (Green, 2010:120). This also impacted the way they reached out to people.

4.1 *The Apostolic church and early Christians' understanding of making disciples*

The early church in the Book of Acts and other references in the New Testament, which falls in the Apostolic church period, is, in essence, mission-driven to share the gospel with those outside the church and to incorporate those who received the gospel into a community of believers. The early church has a "mission history" and a "mission theology" and can only be understood as an organism centered around its essential mission to make disciples (Hengel, 1971). The Spirit-filled church's nature is to bear witness to Christ (Acts 1:8) as the Spirit bears witness to Christ (John 15:26-27). Ogunewu (2014:72) stressed that the reproduction mechanism of the church is "... the active involvement of the church in making disciples [that] will lead to its expansion, neglect of it will spell its doom".

With the literature available on the evangelistic efforts of the church in the first three centuries it seems evident that the pattern of preaching the Word wherever they were scattered continued (Acts 8:4). This seems evident in the establishment of Christian communities by the middle of the second century, not mentioned in the book of Acts such as the Rhone Valley, North Africa, Alexandria, and Britannia (Balge, 1978). Despite several uncertainties on certain doctrines such as justification, the law, and the Gospel in the early church, the fact that God saved through Jesus's sacrificial offer was explicitly affirmed. The early believers spoke and lived the testimony that Christ is the only savior and hope for mankind (Balge, 1978).

Weinrich (1981) explains the early followers of Christ's view of why they had to make disciples, who must be made disciples, and how to make disciples. Why the church made disciples is not only essential because Jesus commanded it, or out of obedience, or gratitude for God's love, neither because of responsibility or concern for mankind's fallen state, although it could be considered as emotive causations "because the Church cannot do otherwise since the Church had been taken up through the Holy Spirit into the very activity of God in Christ whereby the final purposes of God are fulfilled" (Weinrich, 1981:62). Rudnick (1984) believes that the absence of any exhortations or commands to spread the gospel of Christ in early Christian literature can only mean one of two things: it was not deemed important or the calling to spread the gospel was so strong and internalized as a result of the empowerment by the Holy Spirit that it needed no encouragement. Who should make disciples includes every Christian, from apostles, wandering missionaries, local ministers, theologians, to common Christians. Whom did they evangelize? They received Christ's mission as a universal mission of

love, his Lordship, that includes all men and women of all tongues, lands, ethnicities, social classes, and ages. Weinrich (1981:68) explains who is included:

The New Testament reveals the inclusiveness of its fellowship: Cornelius, a Roman centurion (Acts 10: 1); the jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:33); Onesimus, a slave (Philemon); Dionysius the Areopagite, an intellectual (Acts 17:34); Luke, a physician (Col. 4: 14); Aquila and Priscilla, tentmakers (Acts 18:3); Erastus, a city treasurer (Rom. 16:23); Zenas, a lawyer (Titus 3: 13); Simon, a tanner (Acts 9:43); Lydia, a dealer in purple goods (Acts 16:14); Sergius Paulus, a proconsul (Acts 13:2); Crispus, a leader of a synagogue (Acts 18:8); those connected with high society, such as “the saints . . . of Caesar’s household” (Phil. 4:22; cf. 1:13), the Ethiopian eunuch, a court minister to the queen of the Ethiopians (Acts 8:27), Manaen, a court member of Herod the Tetrarch (Acts 13:1), and the ‘prominent’ men and women in Thessalonika and Berea (Acts 17:4,12).

According to McClymond (2010), four aspects of the early Christians’ witnessing can be identified, namely, catholic, charismatic, social-ethical, and evangelical. The catholic tradition stresses the importance not only of the message but even more so of the messenger, who must be an embodiment of Christ. The charismatic tradition is that the spreading of the Gospel should be accompanied by signs and wonders of God’s power, as it started in the early church in the first centuries. The Social ethics tradition refers to impacting the social-cultural structure of the day and the evangelical tradition refers to “Evangelical churches and agencies [that] emphasize the authority of the Bible, the gospel’s doctrinal content the divinity of Jesus, his atoning death, and bodily resurrection, the necessity of conversion and the “new birth,” the ‘lostness’ of un-evangelized people, and the urgency of preaching Christ to all nations before Jesus’ Second Coming” (McClymond, 2010:348).

The important question is how the gospel was spread by the early Christians as part of the Ecclesia. Did they have missionary programs or evangelistic strategies, or did it take place almost as a result of living Christ in all its different aspects of living?

4.2 Disciple-making in the early church

Behr (2011) references research findings by Church historians on the functioning of the church in fulfilling the Great Commission. Firstly, Harnack (1961) studied the history of the church for the first three centuries and concluded that the success of the growth of the church was not primarily because of theological argumentation and intellectual persuasion, since most believers had little or no formal education. It can be attributed to a

loving, active Christian community that took up people from all levels of society and addressed communal needs.

Harnack (1961) further argues that People in the Greco-Roman world reacted to how early Christians conducted themselves visibly in caring for the needy, healing the sick, and driving out demons. Their lifestyle that rejected the Greco-Roman lifestyles and values let them gain credibility and esteem amongst the people. Harnack (1961:98) argues that the early Christians' renunciation of the world made them strong and that their effectiveness was based on their nonparticipation in its impurities. The impact they had on the world can be attributed to those willing to make the sacrifice to stand up with another message against the culture of the day, even if it meant losing their lives.

Secondly, Green (2003), on the other hand, emphasizes that the outreach success of the early church can be attributed to the fact that it was all about Jesus and the Christ-centric message it proclaimed. In this case, although a community played an important role, the message of the gospel was the priority. Followers of Jesus provided existential answers to life, sharing the impact of Christ's gift of grace on their lives and the afterlife.

The contributions by the two aforementioned historians pointed out two important aspects, namely the lifestyles of the believers, but also their proclamation of Jesus the Messiah, and their witnessing. Both of these aspects are important and go hand in hand. The message of Christ is shared in word and deed. When word and deed come together, it results in a community where these biblical values are upheld and demonstrated. The community is no doubt an essential part of strengthening, guiding, protecting, and equipping the followers to continue sharing the faith. It is through the Christian community that new hope and a sense of belonging are established, where new kingdom ideas, real worship of one God, and high moral standards are materialized. Early Christians were different from the other closest religion to them, Judaism. They were not exclusive but inviting. Being included in this community provided not only shelter against a hostile world but also filled the void in a hostile and syncretic society. The Christian community appealed to the entire life of men and women, their feelings, thoughts, and actions. Jesus and his revolutionary teachings and worldview, where the kingdom of heaven was at the center, draw people. The disciple's zealous living and proclaiming his kingdom drew people; they did not have a particular strategy but to live the new life and share the eternal hope found in Christ, and do so with total commitment. This extraordinary living even resulted in dying for the sake of Christ. Christianity

in nature was distinct from the other religions (Guzik, 2023b). According to Latourette (1970), a well-known scholar on the history of early Christianity, there was an opening for the gospel since the other religions did not work anymore. “For a considerable period between the advent of Christianity, the traditional state and family cults of Greece and Rome had been losing their hold. Increasingly, they were unable to satisfy some of the needs for what a large and growing portion of the population looked to as religion” (Latourette, 1970:11). Although the early church experienced its challenges and was not without faults, they pressed on proclaiming their faith in Christ.

Latourette (1970:112) describes the impact and spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire as follows: “Never in so short a time has any other religious faith, or for that matter, any other set of ideas, religious, political or economic, without the aid of physical force or social or cultural prestige, achieved so commanding a position in such an important culture.” Tertullian added more detail to the impact of the early Christians as he wrote: “We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all the places that belong to you — cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges; the military camps themselves, tribes, town councils, the palace, the senate, the market-place; we have left you nothing but your temples (Tertullian translated by Sydney Thelwall, 2020. Chapter XXXVII).

Green (2003) explains that the practical execution of this explosive growth of early Christianity came about mostly due to informal missionaries, meaning Christian lay people who were not trained preachers and evangelists. They were enthusiastic when they conversed about their faith in Jesus and their conversion (Green, 2003:243-244). They simply shared the gospel on a secular level in their normal daily walk and reached out to people wherever they met them. No organized open-air rallies, but small open-air meetings. Their interaction and witnessing about Christ were warm, thoughtful, and challenging. It was mostly on a one-to-one level and with those with whom they have built relationships. It seems that initial converts served as a means for further contact with their circle of friends and family who were invited to group meetings (Stambaugh & Balch, 1986:55). In this regard, the house-*aikos* played a vital role. Many of the Patrician Roman houses were large with adjacent rooms and courtyards that were ideal for worship, companionship, and food. People in urban insulae lived close to one another in small apartments where it was easy for the gospel to spread. A typical Christian home church was small and played an essential role in reaching people with the gospel, as is clear from the New Testament and other historical documents. “Within such a home group there was a conscious

rejection of the status-conscious norms of society, a rejection summarised in the admonition that within the community of the baptized, there was neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free and male or female” (Gal 3:28, James 2:2-12) (Stambaugh & Balch, 1986:55). It was in their own house or others’ houses that the strongest relationships were formed with, friends, clients, and family. It was also a very effective way for children to hear the gospel. If the head of the household was reached, the rest of the house became open for sharing the gospel with the other family members for example in the case of Lydia the seller of dye (Acts 16:14-15) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31-34); their homes became centers for the gospel also reaching the neighbors. The Oikos churches – homes or household churches were seen as incorporating the presence of God. The presence is articulated in family terms, such as God is the father and the Christians are children and heirs (Rom 8). They believed that God acts and is personally and intimately involved in the house assembly. It is also from these houses that they were reminded to live pure lives since impurity is a characteristic of the outside world. Christians’ character of integrity and high moral standards, that they were sometimes persecuted for attracted others. Men and women did not live together outside of marriage, did not eat and drink too much, and had a real concern for justice and cared for other people. Their integrity, God-honoring, and bravery were noticed. When they got together in their house churches, they were reminded of their distinctness (Stambaugh & Balch, 1986). Perhaps the most conspicuous quality of the early Christians was their generosity towards the poor. There are many exhortations to charity in the book of Acts and elsewhere in the New Testament (Acts 20:33-35; Rom 12:13; Eph 4:28; 1 Tim 5:3; James 2:14-17). There are acts of individual charity (Acts 9:36, 10:2-4) and corporate charity. Distributions to widows (Acts 6:1), collections for victims of famine (Acts 11:27-30, 24:17). The early Christians’ concern for human lives was also displayed during later years during the two plagues the Roman Empire experienced in 165 AD and 251AD. While Romans did everything to avoid those affected and threw them in the gutters to die, Christians took care of them and nursed them. Some of them also died in the process but many overcame the epidemic as a result of the love and care of the Christians (Guzik, 2023b).

A natural development of the gatherings in houses was to plant churches, which happened quickly. Traveling teachers using letters from the founding apostles equipped the fledgling leadership. The word used for leadership is ‘presbyter’ always in the plural form to suggest that the leadership exists out of more than one person. For example, in Acts 13, they were a team that worked together, supported and encouraged one another, and also made up

for each other's deficiencies. The leadership seemed to have existed in at least two roles: the prophets, who relied on the functioning of the charismatic gifts, and the teachers, who relied on the word. Last, but not least, great emphasis was placed on the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who leads, guides, and empowers, and every new initiative is His. The Holy Spirit was important for two reasons: firstly, as the one who works in individuals and the church corporately to become more like Christ, and secondly, as the one who gives his followers remarkable spiritual gifts such as tongues, prophecies, healing, and exorcism. There was a demonstration of the power of the gospel, and the people not only heard it but saw it (Green, 2003:310).

4.3 What can be learned from the early church?

Despite the different religious, social, cultural, and political challenges the early Christians faced, the power of the Gospel and the power and working of the Holy Spirit were sufficient to carry the message of hope up until the present time and will continue to do so till the second coming of Christ. It seems that when the Roman Empire experienced disasters such as earthquakes, war, famine, or plagues, the growth in Christianity increased, probably because making disciples and sharing the Gospel was not optional, but the lifestyle of believers gained ground during hardships. They were by no means perfect and did not have all the answers, but were obedient and trusted the one who gave the commission since they had witnessed that He was faithful and honored His word to be with them till the end. Their distinctness from the world and renunciation of the practices of the world, keeping themselves pure, draw people. They were willing to make selfless sacrifices for their faith, standing against the culture of the day. They abound in actions of love and mercy and were correcting injustice. They were worthy witnesses, and signs and wonders accompanied the message; they impacted social and cultural systems, and they preached about Jesus the crucified and resurrected, which brought eternal hope. Above all, they portrayed a real love for the lost and could not do otherwise but share the love of God in Christ.

However, one must admit that the report we find of the early church is how it started, and that it did change and develop over time. Despite that, the authentic lifestyle, integrity, and moral values displayed by the early Christians remain intrinsically part of being a follower of Christ. It was not changed by culture or different ages. What seems lacking in the modern church is an awareness of the importance and relevance of the Great Commission today. It seems that a lopsided view is held about the mission of the church.

Many believe that it is not relevant or less important than other programs the church offers. The church as a meeting place cannot suffice as the only outreach to the world.

Church leaders need to go back to teaching the importance of the Great Commission and to make disciples needs to become a priority. Further, every believer as part of the body of Christ is called to this action, as is evident from the early church (Acts 2:46-47), and has the authority to do so. Each believer is called to a lifestyle of sharing and living the gospel wherever they go. As of old, Christians must continue to share their faith despite threats and bans against doing so. Even to speak amidst an intolerant, twisted, and perverted culture. As in the days of the early church, the philosophies and pagan religions cannot offer salvation and peace with God. The gospel offers eternal hope. Churches further have to engage in intentional strategies involving church members to make disciples and equip believers to participate in sharing the gospel. Believers' houses can become centers where the gospel can be shared firstly with their children, with friends, family, and partners. Believers' influence and lifestyle should be felt in all spheres of life. New places of assembling should be established where people have been reached to teach and establish them in the faith. Important principles of disciple-making in the early church, as discussed above, can and must still be applied to reach unbelievers today (Rainer, 1990:67-68). Above all, the reaching of people in the first century seems to be based on relationships, real interest in the souls of people, and not merely a program.

Making disciples remains an essential part of the church today, but not as a mere number-adding exercise, but rather as a relational action driven by the love of Christ for the lost. Paul, in addressing Israel's rejection of Christ and his salvation, says in Romans 10:13-14, "For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved". Which includes the Jews and the Gentiles. He then stresses the need for Christ to be preached because how else can people believe if they have not heard about him, and how else can they hear about Christ if He is not preached to them? How much does the modern church still rely on the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal Christ, or has manmade institutions replaced the Holy Spirit?

5. Conclusion

What other conclusion can be reached than that the decline in the growth of the church must squarely be laid at the door of neglecting the Great

Commission? Even worse, the church has grown cold in its love for the lost. Has the modern church, in many cases, succumbed to the pressure of modern culture? Lovers of self, lovers of money, and proud? No longer holding fast to the faithful word that has been taught able, by sound doctrine both to exhort and convict those who contradict (Tit 1:9). To press on despite the consequences like Peter and John and the other apostles even if it cost them their lives? Instead of blaming culture and other influences for the decline, one should ask if the decay in the world is not a result of the church's neglect in continuing to proclaim the gospel.

The church in many instances became a comfortable place of fellowship with fellow believers without any outward expression or overflowing of that life into the world. It has almost become a compartmentalized living where different lifestyles are lived in different places. Have the church in some instances just become a feeding place for the believers and not a place of equipping and encouragement to share the grace freely with those outside? Has being taken up in a church community made believers complacent, forgetting about those still lost in the world outside the church? A comfortable church is a powerless church.

It became evident that most, or at least a great number of the evangelical church, seemed to have wavered in fulfilling the great commission of Christ. Not only has this reluctance and neglect led to a decline in the growth of the Christian church, but it has also disempowered those who attend church. It has given ground to the enemy to increase its kingdom on earth. The fact that some believers are not familiar with the term the Great Commission is a serious charge against the leaders of the church. There can not be any higher calling for the church than to bring glory to God and to share His gift of Grace with the world. Neglecting this calling means that the church has failed.

For the church to get back to a similar level of reaching the world is not through evangelism training or disciple-making programs as much as it is through the rediscovery of the reality of the work of Christ and his love for the lost. It is rediscovering through the Holy Spirit the intrinsic nature of being part of the body of Christ that can not help but share His grace and gift of salvation. The distinctness of being a follower of Christ should draw people to Him, in whom they will find salvation.

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