

Discipleship Versus Evangelism

Most Christians believe that the primary purpose of salvation is to avoid hell. That may have been what you were taught, but it's not what the Bible teaches. In fact, that kind of thinking serves to inoculate people from the truth of the Gospel concerning salvation.

If we simply ceased to exist at death and if there was no hell, I still believe that Jesus would have come to earth and died for us. Why? Because salvation is about having a relationship with God. God's main reason for sending Jesus was to restore fellowship. It just so happens that as we restore our relationship with God through salvation, one of the perks—one of the great benefits—is that we miss hell and gain heaven.

Nowhere in the Scripture did Jesus tell us to go and make converts. Let's look at what is commonly referred to as the Great Commission, found in Matthew 28:18-20. It says this:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

Jesus told them to teach others to observe all the things that He had commanded. The Greek word for "teach" in this passage is literally the word that is translated "disciple." The New International Version translated this as "Go and make disciples." The emphasis here is that the Lord commanded us to make disciples, not converts. Somewhere along the way, the church has changed the emphasis of this message from making disciples to getting people born again, leaving discipleship for the "mature."

Did you know that Jesus never preached on being "born again"? In the third chapter of John, He talked to Nicodemus about the spiritual birth compared to the natural birth, but He never taught or preached to the people about being "born again." You may be asking yourself, "How can Andrew say that? That's the centerpiece of every evangelistic effort." You're right—it is—but I believe that the Bible teaches that the church has placed the emphasis in the wrong place. By making that the focus, the church is actually lowering the standards, leaving people with the misconception that all they need to do is just be born again and discipleship is optional. That is not what Jesus commanded.

Statistics say that 33 percent of all "born-again Christians" still support things like abortion and New Age thinking. That certainly does not reflect the attitude of a person who's truly been born again. Billy Graham was quoted as saying that only 15 percent of all the people who professed to be Christian are truly born again. Here is something else that may surprise you: Kathryn Kuhlman said that only 15 percent of those who were healed at her services kept their healing when they left the service. These numbers should tell you something about how success is measured in ministry.

I am not saying that being born again and living eternally with Jesus is not important—it's essential! I'm saying that we have changed the message from the way Jesus taught it. We have reduced the definition of "born again" to the point that in our society today, it has

actually become socially popular to say we're born again and gain acceptance in certain circles.

Jesus said that we are to make disciples, followers of Christ. When we ask people to accept Jesus as their Savior, we need to teach them that this is a total commitment of one's life to the Lord. It means becoming a disciple of Jesus.

Jesus' attitude toward evangelism is much different than that of most Christians. Jesus is more concerned with the quality of ministry than the quantity.

John 2:23-25 says,

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

It says that Jesus did not commit Himself unto them although they believed on Him. The words "believed" and "commit" here are actually from the same Greek word. So, you could say that they believed on Him, but He did not believe in them. He knew they were not disciples. He wouldn't commit Himself to them, because He didn't want man testifying out of his own ability.

When we hear that someone has been born again, we are ready to put them to work, especially if they are public figures with recognizable names. It's like we are trying to sell a product by associating it with someone famous. That totally violates what Paul said in 1 Timothy 3 concerning placing a novice in a position of authority. These are the kinds of shortcuts believers resort to when they limit the true definition of being born again to a simple confession of Jesus as Lord.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I would have been a Christian if I hadn't met one." Before leading the revolution in India, he was exiled in Africa. There, he was seeking the Lord, reading the New Testament. He had become convinced that Christianity was the true religion and that Jesus was the Christ.

He decided to attend a Presbyterian church service for the purpose of confessing Jesus as his Lord. But, because of the color of his skin, they wouldn't let him in. Those people who were so determined to evangelize did not have enough of the nature of God on the inside to look past his color. He then led 750 million people into a pagan religion.

On a trip to India some years ago, I learned there were 12,000 Methodists in the city of Ahmedabad, the result of a great revival in the 1890s. When I asked the head of the church in that city how many were truly born again, he responded by saying it was only two or three families. The rest were still worshiping other gods. All they had done was add Jesus to their list of gods to make sure they didn't miss one. They were obviously not disciples. To those in India, Jesus was just another of the thousands of gods. That is not God's idea of evangelism.

John 8:30-32 says,

As he spake these words, many believed on him. Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

People often say that if you know the truth, the truth will set you free. That is not correct. More correctly, these verses say that when you continue in the Word, then you will know the truth, and the truth you know sets you free. In these verses, Jesus was speaking to those who already believed on Him. Jesus knew that only those who became disciples would truly become free. There is more to believing than just mouthing words.

What we ought to be preaching is that God calls us into discipleship, and it begins with making a commitment to the Lord. If we understood that and acted on it, we would have much greater success evangelizing the world.

Consider this—if you evangelized 1,000 people per year for fifteen years, you would end up with 15,000 new believers, assuming they were all genuine conversions. If you led 1 person to the Lord every six months and spent the next six months discipling that person so they could reproduce themselves, what do you think would happen? In one year, there would only be 2 disciples. However, after sixteen-and-a-half years, if each continued to reproduce themselves every six months, there would be no one left on earth to evangelize. Jesus' method of discipleship would produce nearly 7 billion disciples in less than seventeen years. discipleship evangelism works!

I really believe that the church has missed it in the area of evangelism, making converts and not disciples. By now, you may be thinking, Andrew is right, but I have no idea how to disciple anyone. That's best left to those who are more knowledgeable in the Word of God. Well, I have good news: If you can read, you can change a life!

I have a study guide called The Complete Discipleship Evangelism 48-Lesson Course. I like to call it "Discipleship for Dummies." It will take you through the foundational truths of Christianity in forty-eight lessons. It's simple, it's easy, and it's effective. All you do is read a short story, ask prepared questions, give the prepared answers by looking up scriptures, and watch God work in the life of another. You can't miss with this.