

The Biblical Basis of Discipling Nations

by David Joel Hamilton

Mat 28:¹⁸ *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

As we look at this subject many questions arise? What is involved in the command to disciple nations? What is the end result to look like? How are we to accomplish this end? Is this really for us? How important is this? Why do we find this command only in one verse of the Bible? IS this concept a genuine theme of the Scriptures?

Pray requesting revelation, because apart from God's grace we all filter His truth through our inadequate belief systems and our limited world views. We do not want to reduce God's age-long dream to some little packet that can be archived in the narrow confines of our hearts. We want His truth to explode upon us in supernatural revelation that we may not only be able to understand His dream, but be active participants in it.

1. God's revelation

1. God's revelation is always strategically timed: it is spoken in season, always appropriately purposeful.
 1. As Chaddai to Abraham:
Gen 17:1 *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless.*
 2. As YHWH to Moses:
Exo 6:3 *I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them.*
2. God's revelation is progressive, a forward-looking process over a continuum of time, building a construct of truth culminating in Jesus. We sometimes lose the progressively intense, climactic effect of this revelation because we have read the last chapter (*cf.* a mystery novel): need to relive the process in order to capture the drama of God's heart revelation.

Isa 28:⁹ *"Who is it he is trying to teach? To whom is he explaining his message? To children weaned from their milk, to those just taken from the breast? ¹⁰ For it is: Do and do, do and do, rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there." (NIV) [For precept [must be] upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, [and] there a little: (KJV)]*

3. The key to getting to understanding God's revelation is to seek to understand God's heart/dream/purpose: why did He say that?
 1. Why the careful documentation of the catalogue of nations in Gen 10 and elsewhere? Just a fascination with historical accuracy? Or do nations as nations hold a place in God's heart?
 2. Why did God deal with the nation of Israel as He did? Was it only a pragmatic means for bringing Messiah into the world or were there other things He was attempting to teach us through the dealings with this particular nation?
 3. He has shared with us his heart bit by bit for otherwise we would be overwhelmed with the vastness of His dream and be immobilized, unable to respond to the magnitude of the challenge His purpose sets before us. The fathomless depth and the incalculable breadth of His dream for His creation staggers us. We need to be taught by Him a step at a time in order that we might be able, in some small measure, to begin to dream the dreams that He dreams for His beloved world.

2. God's Revelation through Israel

1. God's initial words (**first commandment**) to Adam & Eve (PROGENITORS OF ALL NATIONS): Because this was given in a pre-fall context we cannot begin to grasp all that was intended (a totally foreign environment), yet we can affirm that expressed a purpose in the heart of God that included the totality of God's created order.

Gen 1:²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

After the detestation of Gen 3, God begins to rebuild a framework of truth by which He can restore his original purpose (line upon line).

2. God's initial words (**first promise**) to Abraham (PROGENITOR OF THE CHOSEN NATION): the formation of a nation.

Gen 12:¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

3. God's ongoing work through Moses: 613 laws according to the Mishnah, dealing with a wide range of aspects of life, not only those things necessary to personal salvation. God taught them through the law areas of

- worship & economics
- personal hygiene & corporate ecology
- governmental leadership & judicial principles
- agriculture & nutrition
- family relationships & national celebrations
- education & caring for the needy
- land usage & military strategies
- music & clothing styles
- immigration laws & medical practices
- architectural guidelines & perfume fabrication
- communication principles & fiscal guidelines

These things are not requisite for personal salvation, but they are an expression of the corporate life style of the community of the redeemed

1. The Decalogue is far more than privatized moral law. We often see God's law only as judicial decrees, whereas in fact they are likewise didactic principles. It is corporate teaching (Torah), a tutor, mentor that leads the hearer from godlessness to Christ (Gal 3:24 *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*) from the material to the spiritual, from paradigm to precept, from the concrete to the abstract, and is designed to disciple a nation (Exo 20:13-17; Deu 5:17-21): It's not static; you have to work it out to its ultimate application.

1. you shall not murder
2. you shall not commit adultery
3. you shall not steal
4. you shall not give false testimony
5. you shall not covet

This is why the Psalmist exclaims: Psa 147:¹⁹ *He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel.* ²⁰ *He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws. Praise the LORD.*

And God, speaking through Moses, states: Deu 4:⁵ *See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it.* ⁶ *Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."* ⁷ *What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near*

us whenever we pray to him? ⁸ And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?

2. The Sermon on the Mount: Jesus continues the process of walking out the implications of seed truths planted at an earlier time. God's truth is alive: it grows in our midst, the full implications not always fully grasped at the first expression of that truth.

6x: "You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ... " (Mt 5:21f, 27f, 31f, 33f, 38f, 43f)

3. Jesus takes the seed truths of the Old Testament to their ultimate conclusion in a totally new way:

Joh 13:³⁴ *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

3. God's Revelation through Christ

Jesus came to usher in the kingdom of God, but the fullness of His purpose escaped even the most discerning of hearts.

1. The religious leaders did not understand Him (Joh 3:10)
2. His parents did not understand Him (Luk 2:50)
3. John the Baptist did not understand Him (Mat 11:2-3; Luk 7:20)
4. Even His own disciples did not understand Him (Joh 8:27; 10:6; 12:16; 13:28; 20:9). Time and again Jesus had to say things like:

- *"Do you understand what I have done for you?"* (Joh 13:12)
- *"Don't you understand...?"* (Mar 4:13)
- *"Don't you see...?"* (Mat 15:17; Mar 7:18)
- *"Do you still not understand?"* (Mat 16:9; Mar 8:21)
- *"Do you still not see or understand?"* (Mar 8:17)
- *"You don't know what you are asking..."* (Mat 20:22)
- *"Why is my language not clear to you?"* (Joh 8:43)

Then when it came to the most important thing of all, when He began to share with them about His upcoming death and resurrection it was more of the same. Mar 9:32 *But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.* (cf. Luk 9:45; 18:34)

So Jesus had to pace His teaching. He shared only as they were able to listen. *With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand* (Mar 4:33). When washing their feet *Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand"* (Joh 13:7).

Jesus' final evening with His disciples was filled with many expressions revealing His desire to share more with them. He had not been able to fully pour out His heart to them, not because of his unwillingness to share, but because of their inability to understand. He longed to be able to go deeper in His communication with them.

Joh 14:²⁵ *"All this I have spoken while still with you.* ²⁶ *But the Counselor, 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.*

Joh 15:²⁶ *"When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me.*

Joh 16:⁷ *But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you...*
¹² *"I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.* ¹³ *But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all 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.* ¹⁴ *He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.* ¹⁵ *All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.*

Joh 16:²⁵ *"Though I have been speaking figuratively, a time is coming when I will no longer use this kind of language but will tell you plainly about my Father.*

When would that coming time be? It would not be until after He had borne the cross and risen from the dead.

4. Discipling Nations: Mat 28

1. **CONTEXT/PREMISE/FOUNDATION:**

18 *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

This passage begins with Jesus' initiative. Jesus, resurrected, reclined in the full authority due to his divine nature, comes to His disciples. This was not their good proposal; this was His eternal purpose. It begins with a divine drawing near: intimacy with the Resurrected One is the foundation of all to follow.

The resurrection reality of Jesus. This was no mere preface to the final command: it was the absolute prerequisite. Only when face to face with the living Christ are they able to hear the next words, the culminating declaration of Jesus' earthly ministry: the most shocking of all that they have heard to this time. You know that when you have a very personal, secret, cherished dream, you carefully pick the moment and the company with which you want to share it. Every detail is orchestrated so that the ones who are privy to this dream value it as it should be valued. It is for this reason that Jesus had first to "wow" them with his resurrection in order to be able to share His heart's greatest dream. without it being discarded outright. it is for this reason that Jesus reminds them of who He is in the most absolute terms. The one who is always pointing to the Father and promoting the Spirit, says listen up, take stock in who I am and what I have done.

2. **CONSEQUENCE:**

19a *Therefore...*

"*Therefore*" (3767 ο_v) used by Jesus 96x in the Scriptures: 95x before His death; only 1x after His resurrection: Mat 28:19. This is the only cause-effect statement that He makes during these climactic 40 days. What follows is to be the paramount highlight consequence/effect/result of His resurrection and exaltation to the place of supreme power and authority in the universe. This is the major post-resurrection revelation that Jesus gave us. The scope and implications of the words to come were so overwhelming that the wonder of the resurrection (without which it would not be possible) would pale in comparison: the end (God's dream) would surpass the means (God's sacrifice). The concept would be so novel, so foreign to their way of thinking that it would require even a greater stretching of their heart and an increase of their faith to believe this than it did to believe in the resurrection. Indeed, like in the case of the predicted death and resurrection, they got it wrong more than once. It would be some time before they began to understand the implications of the new things that Jesus was about to unleash on them. In fact Peter would transmit the essence of the following words so erroneously to Cornelius in Act 10:42 (*He commanded us to preach to the people --λαος -- and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.*) that the Holy Spirit had to interrupt him on the spot.

3. **COMMANDMENT:**

19c *...make disciples of all nations...* μαθητεύσατε (3100 VMAA--YP) πάντα (3956 A--AN-P) τ_ (3588 DANP) _θνη (1484 N-AN-P)

In the 900+ years of Greek (European) literature from Homer to the New Testament, Jesus is the first person to ever connect the verb "to disciple" with the direct object "nations." This is a totally new, radical revolutionary concept. Although Aristotle's discipling of Alexander the Great had resulted in the

hellenization of the Mediterranean world and beyond (NB 4 generational paradigm: Socrates -- Plato & his Academy -- Aristotle -- Alexander the Great), discipling the nations in the values of Greek philosophy and way of life, never had a teacher ever commanded his followers to make this task their deliberate aim.

1. The verb "to disciple" (3100) occurs only 4x in the New Testament (2x used by Jesus): it means "to shape, fashion, mold, teach, instruct, train, mentor, educate."

Mat 13:⁵² *He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law **who has been instructed** (μαθητευθε_ς -- VPAPNM-S) about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."* NB: the subject matter of discipleship is the kingdom. This is the only other time Jesus uses this verb outside of the Great Commission.

Mat 27:⁵⁷ *As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who **had himself become a disciple of** (μαθητεύθη -- VIAP--ZS) Jesus.*

Act 14:²¹ *They preached the good news in that city and **won** a large number of **disciples** (μαθητεύσαντες -- VPAANM-P). Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.*

2. The noun "nation" (1484) is used 164x in the NEW TESTAMENT (32x by Jesus)

2. 19b ...go(ing)...

3. 19d ...baptizing (907 βαπτίζοντες VRPANMYP) them (846 α_το_ς NPAMZP) in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

15x Jesus is recorded as having used the verb "to baptize:"

9x Jesus uses it to refer to suffering and His sacrificial death (Mat 20:22a,22b,23a,23b; Mar 10:38a,38b,39a,39b; Luk 12:50).

3x Jesus uses it to refer to water baptism (Mar 16:16; Act 1:5a; 11:16a).

2x Jesus uses it to refer to Holy Spirit baptism (Act 1:5b; 11:16b).

So how is it used in this passage? Generally it is unquestionably understood to refer to water baptism. This is most probably correct. The question then is how do you baptize a nation. You obviously cannot put

all of Sweden in a baptismal font at one time: water baptism is something that individuals undergo as a public expression of repentance and faith. In this case this sub-command indicates that discipling a nation begins with evangelism, resulting in the conversion that results in individual, yet public demonstrations of faith.

The other possibility is that Jesus is simply telling them to immerse the nations in the name (character/ways) of the Triune God. This would mean that He has called us to flood the nations with the proclamation of the Gospel until all have come into contact with the kingdom: this could be called saturation evangelism or immersion education.

4. *20a and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

When the disciples were told by Jesus that he would rise from the dead, they did not believe. They discarded it outright for how could such an impossible thing be done? Now they were confronted with the one who had said he would do and had done the ultimate impossible thing imaginable, risen in authority and power before them. Now he was talking to them about something even more inconceivable! If it were not for the fact that they were standing in His resurrected presence, when He spoke to them of discipling nations the thought would have been totally preposterous. They would have discarded it outright for how could such an impossible thing be done? but he wowed them with the powerful display of his resurrection in order to be able to finally share with them the desire that had been on his and the Father's heart since the begin of time: the dream of seeing all of the created order reshaped by the transforming revelation of the gospel.

Resurrection? How can it be done? Incomprehensible! Impossible!
Disciple Nations? How can it be done? Incomprehensible! Impossible!

4. **COMMITMENT/PROMISE/FUTURE:**

20b And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The commission begins and ends with Jesus. He draws near to share His heart and He promises to never withdraw. His presence is the energizing means of accomplishing the task. He who commissioned us committed Himself to us. That is the only way in which this dream will become reality.

5. How does this become reality?

Going, baptizing, teaching are only the sketchiest of outlines. Didn't Jesus have more to say on the subject? YES!! Just like a good mystery: you can't figure out the ending until you get there. But once there the clues scattered throughout the preceding pages seem so obvious and so numerous you can't imagine how you missed them the first time through. Jesus always carried the ultimate vision in His heart, but He knew how to pace Himself. Though His plan was to see all nations discipled He undertook one thing at a time: Jesus said, *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel"* (Mat 15:24). Likewise He told His disciples, *"Do not go among the εθνος or enter any town of the Samaritans"* (Mat 10:5). It was not just a pragmatic survival strategy in light of the tense nationalist mood of the day, it was that Jesus had a mission linked to a people. He thought strategically of nations. His mission was to touch not only individuals, but a people with His grace. Peoplehood is important to Him. But how was peoplehood understood at that time?

1. Today peoplehood/ethnicity is most often linked with nation-states. This was a non-existent concept in the New Testament. There were no states in antiquity as we know them today. A person's peoplehood was usually tied to a city (see preceding quotation). Babylon, Athens, Rome were cities. People belonged to cities ("citizenship") which in Greek is πολις ("police, policy, politician").

Mat 12:²⁵ *Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city (πολις) or household divided against itself will not stand."*

NOTE: Here Jesus appears to bring the same application to ever diminishing units: kingdoms which are comprised of cities which in turn are made up of households. Are these the building blocks of nations? In like manner Rev 16:19 speaks of *"the cities (πολις) of the nations (εθνος)."* NOTE the similar imagery in Hebrews when it speaks of Abraham who was promised a nation:

Heb 11:⁸ *By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.* ⁹ *By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.* ¹⁰ *For he was looking forward to the city (πολις) with foundations, whose architect and builder is God...* ¹³ *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.* ¹⁴ *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.* ¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.* ¹⁶ *Instead, they were longing for a better country -- a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city (πολις) for them.*

NOTE: The πολις is the venue, the ministry focus for Jesus' earthly ministry. NB that He sums up this corporate ministry as the reason for His incarnation. 2x He

states in John that He is sending His disciples in the same manner as He was sent. If therefore He came with an awareness of a corporate ministry, then we must go in like manner. NB that in keeping with this he sent His disciples ahead of Him 2 x 2 to every πολις.

Luk 4:⁴³ *But he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns (πολις) also, because that is why I was sent (649 _ποστέλλω)."*

Joh 17:¹⁸ *As you sent (649 _ποστέλλω) me into the world, I have sent (649 _ποστέλλω) them into the world.*

Joh 20:²¹ *Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent (649 _ποστέλλω) me, I am sending (3992 πέμπω) you."*

Luk 10:¹ *After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent (649 _ποστέλλω) them two by two ahead of him to every town (πολις) and place where he was about to go.*

NOTE: 2x Jesus is recorded to have wept: once for an individual (his friend Lazarus); once for a city (Jerusalem). In both cases there was sorrow for the destruction that sin brings in a fallen world. In both the anguish is deep and genuine. Whereas he wept silently for Lazarus (more controlled), he wept audibly over Jerusalem (greater grief? harder to keep His pain in check?)

Luk 19:⁴¹ *As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city (πολις), he wept (κλαίω 2799: to weep audibly) over it*

Joh 11:³² *When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied.³⁵ Jesus wept (δακρύω 1145: to weep silently).*

NOTE that the reward for being faithful for "small matters" (the wise stewardship of financial matters -- 10 minas = two and a half years worth of salary) is that His followers are given responsibility now to manage cities. Success in personal discipleship will lead us to the challenge of corporate discipleship!! Jesus was concerned for the corporate expression of society, and calls us to the same.

Luk 19:¹⁷ *"Well done, my good servant!" his master replied. "Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of ten cities (πολις)."¹⁸ "The second came and said, "Sir, your mina has earned five more."¹⁹ "His master answered, "You take charge of five cities (πολις)."*

NOTE: Final most radical thought about cities: we are to be one.

Mat 5:¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city (πολις) on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*

Imagine: Parque de las Naciones & garbage collection vignette. How do you build a city? Modularly: you must have a vision/plan for the whole, but then you do it one building at a time.

2. Koinonia: this is a nice "Christian" term today with lots of affectionate religious overtones. In Jesus' day it had not this sense. It was simply a fiscal partnership, a for-profit society, a business corporation. Plato, in his *Republic* speaks of the koinonia as the smallest, most basic building block of society: it is what cities and nations are made of. The shocking thing is that the early Christian church called the new thing that God had done in their midst a "koinonia" a corporate partnership with God and one another that would serve as the basic building block of an alternate, counter-culture, model society.

Act 2:⁴² *They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.*

The new koinonia was not identified with the surrounding culture but challenged the surrounding culture prophetically. A koinonia has five distinguishing elements:

1. Socialization process (values, ethics, customs, belief systems): education
2. Economic structure (greed vs generosity; mammon vs stewardship)
3. Leadership structure (domination vs servanthood)
4. Conflict resolution structure (injustice vs justice)
5. External relationships mechanism (coercion vs conviction: evangelism)

According to the koinonia model we are to be distinct from but involved with and influencing the greater society around us. Not a top-down, centralized control. Rather a minority significant in its influence shaping, molding, flavoring. Two culinary metaphors from Jesus: We are called to be

* **SALT** Mat 5:13 *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men."*

* **LEAVEN/YEAST** (shocking imagery for a Jew) Mat 13:33 *He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough."*

3. The individual: Because Jesus dreamed of a disciplined nation, because He ministered in cities, because His followers became an alternate koinonia, He spent some three years with a dozen men (144 U of N credits). This is where it begins.

Discipling the Nations: Mat 28:18-20

A. CONTEXT/PREMISE/FOUNDATION:

18 *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*

B. CONSEQUENCE:

19a *Therefore...*

C. COMMANDMENT:

19c *...make disciples of all nations... μαθητεύσατε πάντα τ_ _θνη*

1. 19b *...go(ing)...*

2. 19d *...baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*

3. 20a *and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

D. COMMITMENT/PROMISE/FUTURE:

20b *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*