

**MISSING**  
**THE MANDATE**  
**IN**  
**THE LAST DAYS**

Copyright 2011 © QUEK KOH CHOON  
ISBN:  
Printed in Singapore

Permission is given to reproduce part or all of it for personal use or distribution. Please distribute free of charge.

“Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION  
Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.”

If you have any feedback, please direct to:  
<http://www.livinginthelastdays.com>, or write to:  
Blk 123, Bedok North Street 2, #01-160, Singapore 460123.

# MISSING THE MANDATE IN THE LAST DAYS

## CONTENTS

|   | Page |
|---|------|
| Preface   | IV   |
| Chapter 1<br>The meaning of the mandate                                   | 1    |
| Chapter 2<br>The general current state of the<br>church and mission       | 4    |
| Chapter 3<br>The biblical basis   | 8    |
| Chapter 4<br>The outworking in spiritual<br>formation and disciple-making | 13   |
| Chapter 5<br>Why believers fail   | 20   |
| Chapter 6<br>The principles underlying<br>transformation and discipleship | 25   |
| Chapter 7<br>Are we indeed missing the mandate?                           | 34   |

## **PREFACE**

The mandate given by the Lord Jesus to the church and the people of God is clearly spelled out in Matthew 28:18-20:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

How are God’s people responding to this mandate? Are we actually carrying out this mandate or are we preoccupied with the peripheral issues which may appear to fulfil the Great Commission but in reality, we are just skimming the surface and may in fact be missing the mark by a great margin?

There is a need to re-examine the essentials of this mandate and to evaluate the essence of this commission given by the Lord Jesus in the light of the last days.

**QUEK KOH CHOON**  
**February 2011**

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE MEANING OF THE MANDATE**

God's people are familiar with Matthew 28:18-20, better known as the Great Commission. Behind this commission given to the Church is the authority of the Lord Jesus; in fact, all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him. Accompanying this Commission is the promise that the Lord Jesus Himself will be with His people always, to the very end of the age, as they carry out this mandate.

#### **(A) THE IMPERATIVE: MAKE DISCIPLES**

The imperative in this mandate is surely to "make disciples of all nations". It is not simply urging people to accept Christ or being contented in having people baptized. Although these are very important, making disciples is essentially helping people to grow in an ongoing, intimate relationship with the triune God. Discipleship implies a definite commitment to God, which endures throughout the ups and downs as well as the changing and challenging circumstances of life.

#### **(B) IT INVOLVES TRANSFORMATION AND RELATIONSHIP**

It involves helping people to be transformed by the thorough and comprehensive teachings of Christ and being conformed to the image of the Master through the

ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a long-term life-long process.

The mandate embraces community life, relationship with God and with other people, the shaping of attitudes, values, character and deeds for the whole of life and beyond.

### **(C) IT INVOLVES LIVING OUT THE TEACHING**

It includes not just teaching by word, but teaching lived out and demonstrated personally and in the context of Church-life and the community. It implies that the ones who disciple and teach must themselves be disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **(D) IT IS THE WORK OF GOD**

At the outset, we need to acknowledge that discipleship and spiritual transformation is primarily God's initiative and action; salvation originates in the Father's amazing and redeeming love; it is in Christ, brought about by His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection; and it is effected in the life of the believer by the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation is not just about conversion; it includes sanctification (spiritual formation and transformation) in the process of discipleship personally and corporately,

realized through the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers.

There can be no mistaken idea that we have the ability to seek God apart from God's initial movement of grace in our lives. Divine action takes priority over human action and it is God's gift that makes possible the task of disciple-making. Recognizing this, we cannot depend on human strategy, methods and means to fulfill the Great Commission; we need to depend solely on God to do His work in His ways and by His Spirit. All of God's work in our lives is a work of grace.

But, as we shall discover later, divine grace is not opposed to moral effort and cooperation with God. It is opposed to earning divine favor and establishing our own merit in the outworking of our faith.

As we consider the extent and meaning of making disciples, we need to ask what the current state of the Church and mission is, in relation to fulfilling the Great Commission.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **THE GENERAL CURRENT STATE OF THE CHURCH AND MISSION**

#### **(A) LOP-SIDED FOCUS ON SECURING CONVERSION**

The church and mission tend to focus so intently on the securing of conversion that little else matters in the fulfillment of the Great Commission. The gradual progressive work of spiritual formation in the making of disciples can be overlooked and overshadowed by the unwholesome focus that prioritizes saving sinners at a moment of decision rather than shaping and molding the lives of believers over a period of many years. Transformation and the making of disciples is a long and arduous journey and it requires more spiritual patience than what is required in the quest of just securing conversions. Yet the imperative in the mandate is crystal clear – “make disciples of all nations”.

#### **(B) OVER-EMPHASIS ON ACTIVITIES AND SERVICE**

After conversion, believers are often encouraged to be up and doing. They are urged to plunge into Christian meetings and various activities and service with the assumption that genuine fellowship with Christ must be expressed in being involved in as many spiritual



activities as possible. This poses a threat to discipleship and spiritual formation when activity is emphasized at the expense of prayer, spiritual discipline and communion with God.

**(C) LACK OF CHRIST-LIKENESS IN THE MESSENGER OF THE GOSPEL**

We have noted earlier that the one who shares the gospel and disciples others must himself be a disciple of the Lord Jesus. It takes disciples to make disciples. It is interesting to note the observation of John Stott in the book entitled “The radical disciple”. He shared that the main reason why our evangelistic efforts are often fraught with failure is that we do not look like the Christ we proclaim. The one who shares must embody the things he is sharing.

Our lop-sided focus on securing conversions and our unbalanced emphasis on activities in the church and mission often result in sending believers to be messengers when they are not spiritually ready and they do not yet look like what they are talking about. The church and mission may mistakenly conclude that such ones are ready simply because they have gone through certain training programmes or acquire some skills in sharing the gospel. Evangelism then becomes the business of counting converts, numbers, and programmes and ignores the faithfulness of the message and the faithfulness of the messenger. This is not to say that believers cannot share what the Lord has done for

their lives, but effective evangelism and disciple making entail spiritual warfare, and authenticity comes from lives which have been transformed by the Spirit of God to face the challenging task of ministering and teaching all that Jesus had taught.

AW Tozer in “Of God and Man” rightly pointed out that the first obligation of the church is not to preach the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth but to be spiritually worthy to spread it. He stressed that Christianity will always reproduce itself after its kind. He highlighted that a worldly minded unspiritual church, when she crosses the ocean to evangelize, is sure to bring to other shores Christianity very much like her own.

In our current context, a church, eager to show statistics that she is mission-minded and is fulfilling the Great Commission, may succumb to the pressure of sending just about anyone who is willing to go. This is a likely scenario, given that there are not many who are even willing to consider being sent (reflecting the poor quality of discipleship in the churches today).

#### **(D) PASSIVITY AND SUPERFICIALITY**

For many believers, after conversion and believing in Jesus, they are not quite sure what to do with the rest of their lives. a) For some, it is just looking forward to heaven one day and perhaps to persuade some to go along with them. b) Some look at Christianity as an obligation to live by the rules and if they fail, they

simply try to do better the next time. c) Others think that the rules ought to come easily as they are already converted and when they find it not to be so, pretend that it is. Among these are those who expect that they will automatically want to live according to God's will and when they see the shortcomings and failures in their lives, they become disillusioned and guilt-stricken. d) Then there are those who prefer to go by the saying, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven", so why strive so hard for perfection? They suppose that it is what everyone else is experiencing and this is as good as it can get.

Is this what God truly desires for His children? What is His calling for His children and how is this related to His mandate in the Great Commission? What has it got to do with making disciples?

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **THE BIBLICAL BASIS**

We have noted that making disciples is essentially helping people to be transformed and conformed to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ and biblically, this is in line with God's desire.

#### **(A) GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE**

“For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.”

Romans 8:29

Here it is clear that Christ-likeness is the eternal predestination purpose of God for believers. Being disciples and making disciples is therefore in the main flow of God's eternal purpose for His people. Certainly, God's children cannot just be satisfied with being converted and remaining as babes in Christ. The church cannot condone a situation where believers remain stagnant in their spiritual formation and become like members belonging to a social club.

#### **(B) GOD'S WORKING THROUGH HIS SPIRIT**

“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his

likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 3:18

The scriptures confirm the work of the Holy Spirit in the transformation of believers into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. This takes place through a face-to-face encounter with the glory or personal presence of the Lord. How does this happen? The believers must make themselves available to encounter the presence of the Lord personally and corporately, and God has given the disciplines of grace to facilitate this. The disciplines of grace include prayer, the reading and studying of God's word, meditation, worship (personally and corporately) and the sacraments (including the communion at the table and baptism).

It is important to realize that God seeks a people for Himself; a bride for the bridegroom Jesus; a temple made up of living stones (believers); a spiritual body with Jesus as the head and a family with the Lord Jesus as the firstborn. It is not individualism that God seeks; God is seeking to transform a people for Himself, a people who would truly reflect and declare His glory.

Spiritual formation and transformation take place in the context of a healthy church, brought about by the ministry of the Holy Spirit as God's people make themselves available to encounter Him in the disciplines of grace. This is part and parcel of the process of making disciples. As God's people become more conformed to

the image of the Son, they will begin to love what the Lord loves and hate what God hates. Victory over sin and a holy life becomes more and more a reality and less and less a struggle as Christ is formed in us.

**(C) BELIEVERS' HOPE AND PURSUIT**

“Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as He is. Everyone who has this hope purifies himself, just as he is pure.”

1 John 3:2-3

We see this hope that we will be like the Lord Jesus when He appears. And certainly, this hope and the pursuit of purity have very much to do with spiritual formation and disciple-making. The eternal predestination purpose of God for believers to be conformed to the likeness of His son will be perfected and confirmed at the second coming of the Lord Jesus. In the meanwhile, believers who perceive this purpose of God and this hope in Him have a strong motivation to purify themselves in the process of discipleship and to make themselves ready for this glory that is to come. The process of transformation begins here and now in Christ, for us as God's children, born again as citizens of heaven, with the potential to grow until Christ is truly formed in us.

## **D) GOD'S CALL TO HIS PEOPLE**

Besides the Apostle Paul and the Apostle John, the Apostle Peter also had much to say about God's call to believers to be conformed to the image of His son in the process of disciple-making.

“But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy.’”

1 Peter 2:15-16

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

1 Peter 2:9

Take note of the descriptions: ‘chosen people’, ‘royal priesthood’, ‘holy nation’, ‘a people belonging to God’. Believers are collectively chosen to belong to God, to be holy, to be priests to God and in that light and capacity, we are to declare God's praises. We are to share the gospel and to proclaim the love and mercy of God in the Great Commission, not just by our words, but also in our lives by reflecting His character and His glory as light in a world of darkness and as salt of the earth. The messenger must look like the Christ he proclaims, and resemble what he is talking about in the sharing of the gospel.

He does it in complete reliance on God and His Spirit and he declares a righteousness not of his own but a righteousness given to all those who would believe and receive the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord, in genuine repentance. It is a righteousness, beginning with justification, worked out through sanctification and spiritual formation here on earth and perfected and confirmed when the Lord Jesus comes again.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE OUTWORKING IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION AND DISCIPLE-MAKING**

#### **(A) IT INVOLVES SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE**

We are clear that salvation is by grace through faith. But that does not mean that believers should allow passivity to set in. Grace meets us where we are but is not content to let us remain as we are; it moves us to be transformed to be like the Lord Jesus. Grace is God acting in our life to enable us to do what we cannot do on our own. Paul, in Philippians 2:12, urged the believers to continue to work out their salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them to will and to act according to His good purpose. This is in line with the above principle. Grace is not contrary to discipline; in fact, grace is closely tied up and bound up with discipline (Titus 2:12).

The apostle Paul, in his ministry wrote,

“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”

Colossians 1:28-29

The aim of the Christian life is crystallized by the apostle –it is to present everyone perfect in Christ. Paul labored and struggled to effect this in the believer’s life; this speaks of discipline, diligence and moral effort. Nonetheless, Paul made it clear that the energy that powerfully worked in him was not his own but it came from the Holy Spirit of God.

The apostle also expected the believers to do the same for the spiritual formation in their lives. He exhorted the believers,

“...put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires ...put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness”.

Ephesians 4:22-23

Putting off the old self and putting on the new self require moral effort and diligence, albeit, in dependence on the Holy Spirit. It is by the Spirit that we put off and put on. This means that we continually, in fellowship with the Holy Spirit, being conscious of His presence in our lives, co-operate with Him and look to Him for His enabling to deal with the negative aspects of the old self, as He brings them to our awareness. Likewise, as He prompts us to pursue certain positive aspects of the new self, we need to be obedient to His guidance and teachings. Essentially, this is what walking in the Spirit means in actual outworking. Ignoring the Spirit and grieving Him, and seeking to live by our own wisdom and understanding would be walking in the flesh. Those

who walk in the flesh cannot please God, for the ways of the flesh are contrary to the ways of the Spirit and they will lead to spiritual death.

The apostle James urged believers to be doers of the word and not just hearers only (James 1:22). Grace is certainly not opposed to moral effort and moral action; it is opposed to earning merit and the pursuit of legalism.

The apostle Peter, although he had no doubt about God's grace in the believers' salvation, wrote:

“...make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness knowledge; and to knowledge self control; and to self control perseverance; and to perseverance godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness love.”

2 Peter 1:5-6

There is no doubt that spiritual formation involves discipline. It requires effort, diligence, labor and action but it is done in dependence on God and in reliance on God's Spirit. There is no room for self-reliance or human effort and willpower. Spiritual formation and discipleship invariably involve intentional action and commitment on the part of the believers; it does not happen automatically after conversion. It requires cooperation with God to make it happen.

## **(B) THE DISCIPLINES OF GRACE PERSONALLY AND CORPORATELY**

God has given His children the disciplines of grace to facilitate their spiritual formation. These include Bible study, prayers, worship, special time devoted to the Lord, meditation and the like. Such disciplines help in the renewal of the mind such that believers can think the way God thinks and assimilate the values which come from the Lord. They prevent His children from being conformed to this world and being led astray by the desires of the flesh and the deception of the evil one (Romans 12:2).

The disciplines of grace also make the believers available to encounter the presence of God and to develop and nurture communion with the Lord. This is essential in transformation and spiritual formation. The Holy Spirit enables the believers to grow spiritually as they discipline themselves in cooperation with God to experience the transformation process in their lives. This takes place not only personally but also collectively in the church context. Lacking one of these, there can be no wholesome transformation and spiritual formation in the lives of individuals and the church.

At the church level, those in leadership must endeavour to preach and to teach the Word with all boldness and accuracy, covering the whole counsel and purpose of God. As the Spirit enables, comprehensive preaching and teaching contribute significantly to

spiritual formation and transformation in the life of the church.

In that light, what Paul wrote to Timothy is so important for Christian leaders:

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

2 Timothy 2:15

Disciplines of grace are even more relevant in the lives of leaders as they can influence many, rightly or wrongly. Theology is very important, for right understanding leads to right outworking and living. The apostle James sounded out the sober warning:

“Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly”.

James 3:1

Collectively, the reverential approach to worship and the observance of the sacraments (including the Lord’s Supper and baptism), the life of prayer and fellowship in Church-life – all these disciplines of grace help the church to grow into the likeness of the Lord Jesus.

What is clear is that these disciplines of grace personally and collectively require moral effort, diligence and perseverance on a long-term basis. Noble

intentions are not enough if we are unwilling to exercise effort and exertion.

Paul urged Timothy along this line:

“But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”

1 Timothy 6:11-12

Paul himself declared:

“No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

1 Corinthians 9:27

“My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.”

Galatians 4:19

We see the language of discipline, moral effort and exertion coming through in all these passages in the pursuit of godliness. Certainly, these do not describe a picture of passivity and indifference, so rampant in the lives of many of God’s people today. What is also implied is a need for a significant investment of time in such disciplines. We cannot expect much progress if we

just give snippets of time here and there in such an important pursuit as this. We need to give priority to invest much time in seeking to be disciples and in making disciples!

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **WHY BELIEVERS FAIL**

Why is it that although some believers take the disciplines of grace seriously in their lives, yet they seem to sink into spiritual doldrums and despondency. Their prayers become a struggle; their worship of God does not seem satisfying; the time spent in Bible reading and study appears unexciting and dreary; their spiritual life and witness become 'dry' and ineffective.

#### **(A) MERE ROUTINES**

Among many reasons, one notable one is that the spiritual disciplines have become mere routines. A routine is something we undertake to maintain a status quo; it does not change or improve anything – it just allows the situation to remain as it is. A routine requires only a minimal effort and it does not demand any exertion.

A discipline, on the other hand, requires a great deal of effort and exertion. We may need to push our physical bodies, stretch our minds and exert ourselves to take on new responsibilities or change habits or a lifestyle. Certainly, a discipline requires an investment of time and a choice of priorities. Some things need to be given up in order to realize the goal of that particular discipline. This is also true for spiritual discipline.



The outcome of genuine spiritual disciplines is becoming more and more like Jesus. It may not take place suddenly or quickly; it may be gradual but it is definitely moving forward towards the goal of transformation into the image of the Master.

We must not allow our spiritual disciplines to degenerate into mere routines in our lives. This occurs when we are not prepared to invest the amount of time required or when we approach such disciplines with the wrong motivation. What are some of the wrong motivations that contribute to our disciplines degenerating into routines?

### **(B) WRONG MOTIVATIONS**

We carry out our spiritual disciplines grudgingly, begrudging the time set aside to be with the Lord, doing these exercises just to assure ourselves that we are good Christians. It is basically fulfilling our quota of 'disciplines' in order to feel good about ourselves and to think ourselves better than some other believers who hardly carry out any disciplines.

We embark on certain disciplines in order to look for something to teach someone else so that others may be impressed with our knowledge and spiritual standing. This may take place when we are assigned to lead a Bible study, for instance. We may also enter into these disciplines to discover how somebody else is wrong about a certain doctrine or teaching.

### **(C) PROPER MOTIVATIONS REQUIRED**

We must not forget that the disciplines of grace are given so that we may enter into an intensive encounter with God; they are to help us to meet with God, to worship Him, to commune with Him, to learn from Him and to grow to be like Him. As such, the outworking requires our undivided attention, and we need to ensure that distractions and disruption are kept to a minimum. God's Word and God's Spirit can powerfully work in our lives when we are willing to wait upon the Lord, to listen carefully for His prompting and to long for His ministry and life.

The right motivations would ensure that such a conducive environment is created and maintained for wholesome growth in the process of spiritual formation. Unless and until believers appreciate the need to work hard (in dependence on God) in giving priority, time and devotion to communion with God and the nurturing of our relationship with the Holy One, personally and corporately, the making of disciples, spiritual formation and transformation will not be realized. God's children will remain as babes in Christ, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, easily impressed by signs and wonders (which the evil one also performs) and led to pursue emotional experiences and fleshly desires in the name of Christianity.

## **(D) NEED FOR A POSITIVE SPIRITUAL ENVIRONMENT AND SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT**

At the church level, even though some congregations implemented small group training sessions, introduced discipling programmes and gospel equipping training, yet initial enthusiasm soon faded and they were back to square one, with little progress in ministry and in the process of spiritual formation.

We need to be mindful of what the Lord Jesus said in Acts 1:8:

“...But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses, in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.”

The Great Commission is the Lord’s instruction to the Church but the instruction is to be carried out with the power of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual empowerment is needed to make disciples of all nations. Saturating God’s people with methods and equipping them with concepts and theories of ministry without empowerment of the Spirit will not help them in the process of discipleship and disciple making.

What is perhaps more needful for God’s people is empowerment to live daily lives victoriously, in homes, in schools, in the workplace and in the market place. We need the Spirit’s enabling to use the rather insignificant

things in the daily routines of life to accomplish significant things for God. Empowerment for daily living in the context where people live and work is needful before they are sent into the world. When God's people are easily discouraged, spiritually depressed and defeated in the daily routines of life, how will they fare in ministry and spiritual warfare?

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING TRANSFORMATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

“Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”

Luke 9:23

If we desire to follow the Lord Jesus and be conformed to His image as disciples, the denial of self and the carrying of the cross must come into operation in our lives. We see aspects of these expressed in Philippians 2:3-8:

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interest, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus who, in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”

Humility, self-giving and other-centeredness were clearly expressed in the attitude and life of Jesus Christ when He went to the cross, in obedience to the Father. Christ is our supreme example and we are exhorted to have the same attitude as that of the Lord Jesus.

The denial of self, humility, other-centeredness and obedience to God – all these are qualities to be increasingly seen and realized in the lives of disciples of the Lord Jesus as they are being transformed into His likeness. These can perhaps be best expressed by three principles manifested at the cross.

#### **(A) DEATH LEADING TO LIFE**

The Lord Jesus put it in this manner in John 12:24:

“I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Here is an illustration of life and fruitfulness coming forth out of death. At the cross, the death of Jesus leads to His resurrection and His exaltation as Savior of the whole world. We who believe in Him died with Him at the cross as a spiritual reality and we are born again to a new life in Him (Romans 6:3-5). At the cross, Christ’s death ended the reign of sin and death. The reign of the old self also ended for those who believe in Him. His death brings life to us and effects a right relationship with God, when met with faith.

We cannot fully appreciate deeply the meaning of the cross unless we recognize and acknowledge the depth and vileness of our sin, and the glorious and awesome holiness of God.

In the outworking of our Christian life and sanctification (which involves spiritual formation), we need, by the Spirit, to put to death the old self and put on the new self. Christians have already died with Christ (as the basis of their new creation) and they continue to die and be raised with Christ (as their daily experience).

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.”

Galatians 5:24

In other words, the sinful nature (old self) has been put to death at the cross. In actual outworking, this spiritual reality must be expressed in the mortification of the flesh, in daily living, putting to death the deeds of the flesh, in order to live by the Spirit, saying ‘no’ to the sinful nature and saying ‘yes’ to the Spirit of God.

‘Death leading to life’ is also seen in the sacrifice for others, being ‘others-centered’, looking to the interests of others and being prepared to deny ourselves, for the sake of the Lord and for the sake of others, in Christian love. In this case, ‘dying daily in our lives’ brings spiritual life to others. This is what Paul meant when he wrote, ‘I die daily’ (2 Corinthians 4:12).

Paul knew that suffering for the good of others can be an experience, not of God's absence and displeasure but of God's presence and love. He also realized that suffering for others is ultimately suffering for Christ, who Himself suffered for others.

**(B) WEAKNESS LEADING TO STRENGTH**

“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardship, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Here is a paradox that is ever so true in Christian living. After becoming Christians, how often we are taught that while we are justified by grace, we grow by our works and human effort. If we try to grow in our own power and strength, it will not be long before we crawl back, in weakness and defeat, to the cross and remember that it is only by His grace and His enabling that we grow to be like Him. To depend on our own strength and power to grow spiritually and to minister to others would invariably lead to exhaustion and failure. It is only when we realize how weak we really are in ourselves that we are in a position to avail ourselves of God's power and strength. We can then appreciate why Apostle Paul wrote that for Christ's sake, he delights in



weaknesses, in insults, in hardship, in persecution, in difficulties. Paul knew that when he was weak in himself, he could be truly strong in the Lord.

Paul also acknowledged the reality of hostile powers in the universe and spiritual warfare. These powers include the evil one, demons, rulers and powers, sin and death. The liberating power needed for victory has been provided by God through His Son on the cross and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. We cannot battle these forces on our own; we need the life-giving power of God to experience victory.

**(C) SUFFERING LEADING TO CHARACTER FORMATION AND GLORY**

“Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings because we know that sufferings produce perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

Romans 5:3-4

Suffering is closely connected to hope. It leads not to despair but to a deep assurance of future salvation and glory. Hope is in fact the certainty that the ultimate fate of the humiliated crucified Messiah will also be the fate of all those who are co-crucified with Him. The future for such ones would be resurrection, exaltation and a sharing in the glory of the Lord!

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

James 1:2-4

“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

1 Peter 1:6-7

Scriptures clearly reveal that for genuine believers and disciples, sufferings and trials produce perseverance, character and maturity in Christ. In other words, God allows sufferings and trials to mold His children to become mature in Christ. Suffering for the Lord God is part of the Christian calling and it contributes significantly to the making of true disciples of Jesus Christ. Denying ourselves and carrying the cross are part of the expression of suffering in the life of the disciple. We live in a hostile world and we have a formidable enemy; persecution and trials are to be expected. In sharing the gospel, this aspect must be shared clearly. We cannot give the impression that the gospel is all about material blessing, healing and prosperity here on earth. Those who respond positively to the gospel must be prepared for genuine discipleship and this would

include denying the self, taking up the cross and following the Lord Jesus on the road to 'Calvary'.

To the Apostle Paul, suffering is a manifestation of love. It allows him to identify with and express to others the self-sacrificial, forgiving love of God in Christ – that is in Christ's death. Especially in suffering, Paul experiences the love of God in Christ, by means of the Holy Spirit. Hence suffering can be joyful and meaningful even though it may be painful at the same time ( 2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

### **THE CROSS AT THE CENTRE**

The three principles demonstrated at the cross: 'death leading to life, 'weakness leading to strength' and 'sufferings leading to character formation and glory' would be in operation in the process of making disciples and being disciples. The cross is at the centre of the gospel message and it is only through the cross that death and the evil one have been defeated. Discipleship and transformation cannot take place apart from the cross of Jesus Christ.

As we evaluate whether we have missed the mark in fulfilling the Great Commission, we need to ask whether the cross has been at the centre of our gospel message and whether the cross has been highlighted and taught at the heart of disciple making. The history of the church has been defiled by many who chose power over love, control over the cross, reputation over servanthood and self over God's glory. This kind of defilement is not

what disciples are made of. Discipleship is ultimately measured in terms of surrender to God, humility, obedience to Him in love and the character of godliness. It is also expressed in sacrificial love for others for Christ's sake. All these are in line with the principles of the cross and they are contrary to self-love, pride, self-centeredness and self-glory.

The cross manifests Christ's suffering love, His non-retaliatory forgiveness and grace, and His self-giving, self-emptying sacrifice for us. The cross also expresses Christ's enduring, steadfast faithfulness and obedience to God. The cross reveals not just how God achieved salvation for us; it demonstrates the way that God works. The Lord God works in accordance with the pattern and principles of the cross. For disciples of Christ Jesus, these qualities and pattern are to be expressed in increasing measures in our lives as we work out the principles of the cross in our vertical relationship with the Trinitarian God and in our horizontal relationship with our neighbor, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

There is no place for pride, self-glory and self-righteousness in the cross. Instead, in the cross, there is power to become self-giving love; there is the power to be weak and humble, the power to serve, the power to endure and to sacrifice for the sake of others and for the glory of God in Christ.

In the cross, suffering is not the last word; death gives way to resurrection and suffering leads to glory in God.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **ARE WE INDEED MISSING THE MANDATE?**

#### **GROWTH WITHOUT DEPTH**

As we view the Christian scene today, there is no doubt that there is tremendous growth of the church in many parts of the world.

John Stott, when asked how he would describe the Christian scene today, replied, 'growth without depth'. It is true that the church has grown numerically in many countries in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also true that there is superficiality of discipleship everywhere, and many Christian leaders are concerned.

In his book "The Radical Disciple", John Stott highlighted two letters he received from Christian leaders in South Asia and Africa respectively. A leader from South Asia wrote, "There is a huge problem with lack of godliness and integrity". An African leader wrote, ".....the growth is largely numerical...the church is without strong biblical and theological foundation of her own". The view of many Christian leaders confirmed the truth that there is growth without depth in many cases. There is statistical growth with no corresponding discipleship development.

## **CHURCH DWINDLING AND DYING**

There is the other aspect of the Christian scene—some churches in the US and the western countries are not growing; instead, they are dwindling in numbers. In fact, the churches in these countries are ‘dying’, with conversions declining in numbers, fewer baptisms and the churches also losing influence on the community and among the younger generation in particular. Many are finding the church irrelevant and increasing numbers are leaving.

## **EVALUATION OF THE CHRISTIAN SCENE**

As we evaluate the Christian scene and measure it against the mandate of the Great Commission – what is the sad inevitable conclusion? We have failed miserably to make disciples of all nations. There may be numerical growth in many Asian and developing countries but it is basically growth without depth. Discipleship is generally superficial. In the western countries, many are leaving the church and the church is dwindling and ‘dying’. What are some of the reasons behind this picture of dismay?

### **(A) BIBLICAL ILLITERACY**

Among the notable reasons, several ones are cited again and again. One is biblical illiteracy. There is a neglect of theological and biblical teaching corporately, and on a personal level, many may not even understand the basics of scriptures and the foundation of the faith.

There is not even the attempt on the part of many to correct this situation as many feel that they should leave such things to the pastors and full time workers.

### **(B) BUSYNESS**

Another reason highlighted is busyness, especially among the younger generation. Many are involved in pursuing their careers and they spend more time on their work, on the computer and in many activities that include recreation, sports and socializing. There is no time for Bible study, fellowship and worship services. In other words, these areas are not given the priority in the lives of many. When there is extra time, many prefer to catch up with their sleep rather than engage in the pursuit of godliness.

### **(C) HYPOCRISY**

Yet another reason is the perception that there is too much hypocrisy in the church as well as in the homes. What many understand from the Bible is not seen in the lives of believers and even in the lives of their parents at home.

Whether it be growth without depth in the developing nations or dwindling numbers in churches in the western countries, we notice that the common denominator is the failure in disciple making. Depth would imply growing in discipleship and maturity; that would involve knowing and understanding God and the Bible. To know the authentic Christ, we must know the



Bible; ignorance of scriptures is ignorance of Christ. The clearer our vision and appreciation of Christ, the richer will be our discipleship and the deeper will be our spiritual growth towards maturity. And to know the Bible, we must be prepared to invest our time; discipleship and transformation is not automatic – it requires much time and it is a long and even arduous process.. It will also require diligence and perseverance, in reliance on God’s Spirit and not on our own wisdom and strength. Certainly, if there is growth in discipleship and transformation, there will be more believers who look more like the Christ they proclaim. This would be the answer to the complaint of hypocrisy.

#### **(D) OUTWORKING OF LIFE**

Depth also means teaching believers to obey everything the Lord Jesus has commanded. “Everything” would mean no lop-sided emphasis on certain teachings at the expense of other important teachings. It would mean wholesomeness in teaching and communicating the whole counsel and will of God (Acts 20:27). It is also not limited to teaching; what is important is that believers must obey everything the Lord Jesus has taught and that would mean practical outworking of life”.

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves, do what it says.”

James 1:22

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

### **LEARNING FROM HISTORY**

As we evaluate whether we are missing the mandate, it is helpful also to recognize that we need to understand and appreciate the history of Christianity and the church in order to avoid repetition of past mistakes and to nurture the past strengths. We cannot afford to sit on the fence when it comes to fundamental truths in theology that affect the purity of the gospel. We must uphold what our brethren fought for and defended vigorously to preserve the biblical teachings of the Lord Jesus and the apostles – this is part of teaching all that the Lord Jesus has commanded in making disciples. Many of the wrong teachings in the history of the church have a tendency to come back in various forms; we must be alert to this and we must detect and discern what is amiss in such teachings.

We must not be intellectually lazy as we are called to love the Lord God with all our minds as well. Believers need to know what they believe and why they believe and this may involve thinking through our faith and many hours of intense study at the feet of Jesus. The Great Commission aims to make significant disciples of Christ, not just superficial believers.

## **AWAKENING FROM INDIFFERENCE**

Elie Wiesel, Nobel Laureate and holocaust survivor, has written that the opposite of 'love' is not 'hate' but 'indifference'. Perhaps a most serious malady affecting believers and the Church today is indeed 'indifference'. Many believers are neither "hot" nor "cold". The warning of the Lord Jesus regarding this must not be ignored.

"So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth".

Revelation 3:16

In particular, "indifference" to the mandate given by the Lord Jesus in the Great Commission is not a minor issue in the eyes of God.

## **CAUTION AGAINST PRESUMPTION**

Another danger facing the church and believers is presumption. We think that we are doing well for God when in fact, we are just going through the motion and accomplishing activities which may appear spiritual but something is vitally missing, and we may actually be far off the mark.

"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked".

## Revelation 3:17

We must realize our true spiritual state before it is too late. It is the Lord God who judges and He sees everything; nothing is hidden from Him. Ultimately, it is His approval that matters.

### CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

The questions we need to ask at this juncture are:

- Are we missing the mark?
- Are we carrying out the mandate to make disciples of all nations?
- Are we indeed fulfilling the Great Commission?

May the Lord God help us to evaluate honestly as we see the day approaching and realize that we need to stand before Him to give an account of our lives and our ministry.