

First Sabbath

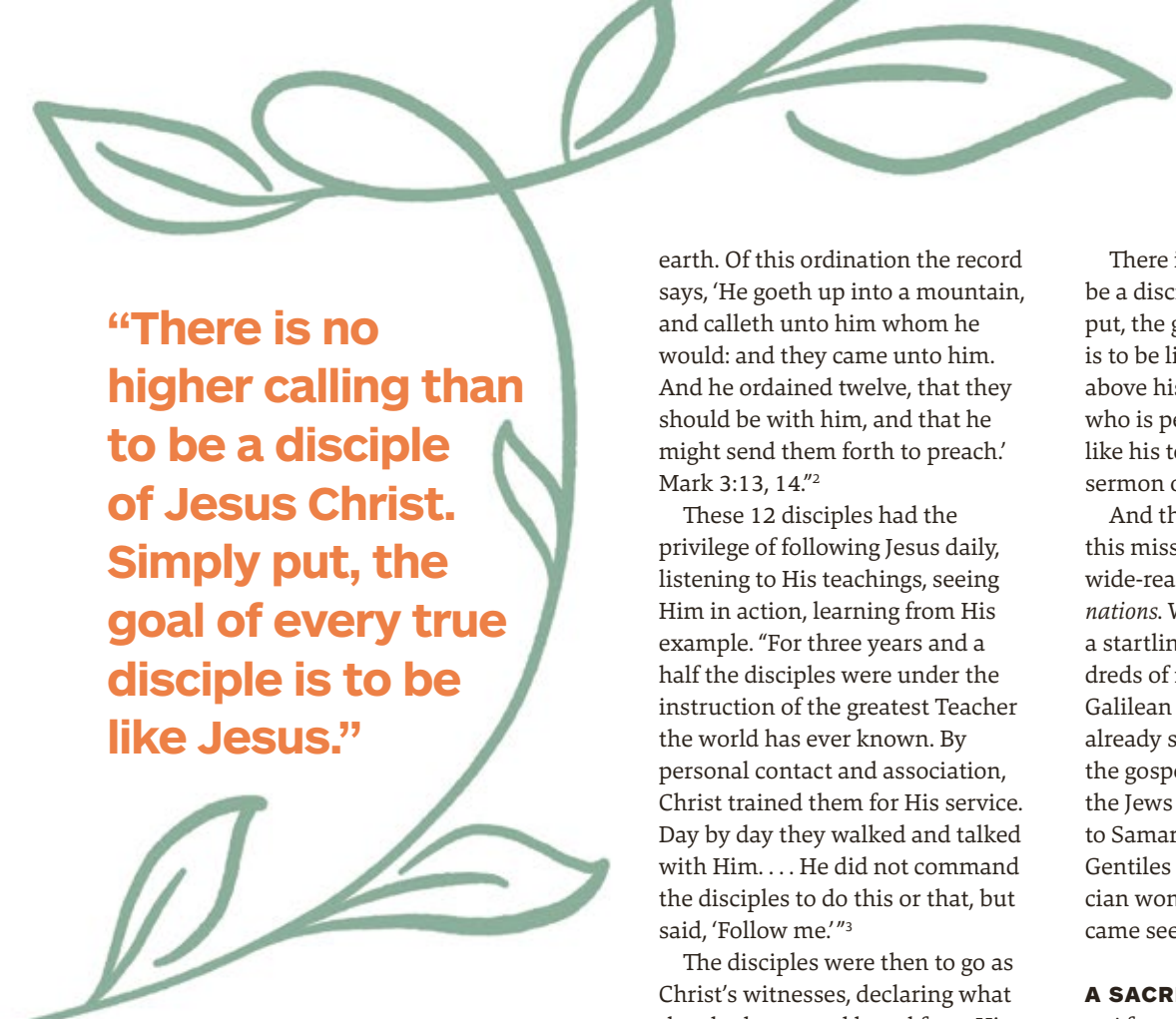
I Will Go Make Disciples

Discipleship
and the Mission
of the Church

BY TED N. C. WILSON

More than 2,000 years ago on a springtime mountainside in Galilee, the risen Christ met with His disciples, along with hundreds of His followers, to give them important instruction in how to carry forward the mission He began in reaching souls for the kingdom of heaven. For many this would be the only time they would see and hear directly from their risen Lord.

“Of this meeting,” we are told, “Christ Himself, before His death, had designated the time and place. The angel at the tomb reminded the disciples of His promise to meet them in Galilee. The promise was repeated to the believers who were gathered at Jerusalem during the Passover week, and through them it reached many lonely ones who were mourning the death of their Lord. With intense interest all looked forward to the interview.”¹



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As the group gathered on a hillside in Galilee, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. In awe they listened as He personally spoke the famous command recorded in Matthew 28:18-20—“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

THE START OF THE CHURCH'S MISSION

About three years earlier another important event took place on a Galilean mountainside. Inspiration tells us, “It was at the ordination of the Twelve that the first step was taken in the organization of the church that after Christ’s departure was to carry on His work on the

earth. Of this ordination the record says, ‘He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto him whom he would: and they came unto him. And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach.’ Mark 3:13, 14.”²

These 12 disciples had the privilege of following Jesus daily, listening to His teachings, seeing Him in action, learning from His example. “For three years and a half the disciples were under the instruction of the greatest Teacher the world has ever known. By personal contact and association, Christ trained them for His service. Day by day they walked and talked with Him. . . . He did not command the disciples to do this or that, but said, ‘Follow me.’”³

The disciples were then to go as Christ’s witnesses, declaring what they had seen and heard from Him. They were to train and educate others, sending them out to share the gospel message. And to do this, they were given the power of the Holy Spirit.

A CALL FOR ALL BELIEVERS

And now, once again on the mountainside, the risen Christ was giving the gospel commission, not only to those He had designated leaders of His church,⁴ but to all believers everywhere.

Lifting their sights heavenward, Christ declared that His work on earth had been accomplished and that He was returning to His Father in heaven. Assuring His followers that “all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth,” He articulated the mission of His church, outlined through the lens of discipleship, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

There is no higher calling than to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Simply put, the goal of every true disciple is to be like Jesus. “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher,” said Jesus in His sermon on the mount (Luke 6:40).

And this call to discipleship, this mission of the church, is wide-reaching—encompassing *all nations*. While this must have been a startling revelation to the hundreds of followers sitting on that Galilean mountainside, Jesus had already shown while on earth that the gospel was for more than just the Jews alone. He had ministered to Samaritans, Romans, and other Gentiles such as the Syrophenician woman and the Greeks who came seeking Him during the feast.

A SACRED WORK

After receiving Christ’s commission, His followers set about witnessing first to those closest to them—relatives, friends, neighbors, expanding outward. One such dedicated disciple was Tabitha, also known as Dorcas.

“She had been a worthy disciple of Jesus Christ, and her life had been characterized by deeds of charity and kindness to the poor and sorrowful, and by zeal in the cause of truth. Her death was a great loss; the infant church could not well spare her noble efforts.”⁵ Her discipleship played such a vital role in the mission of the early church that when she died, God worked a miracle through the apostle Peter, restoring her to life (see Acts 9:36-42).

As the church continued to grow, Christ’s followers began to realize just how broad their calling was, as revealed by Paul when addressing the men of Athens on Mars Hill: “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on

all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:26, 27).

Down through the ages God has been guiding His church as His message has been carried from disciple to disciple, sometimes at the cost of their very lives, making disciples by teaching God’s Word, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and mentoring as Jesus did.

OUR PRIVILEGE

Today, what a privilege it is to be part of this Great Commission and final loud cry to the world, sharing the everlasting gospel in the context of the three angels’ messages of Revelation 14! Ellen White links the Great Commission with the three angels’ messages in a clear and powerful way:

“In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. On them is shining wonderful light from the Word of God. They have been given a work of the most solemn import—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels’ messages. There is no other work of so great importance. They are to allow nothing else to absorb their attention.

“The most solemn truths ever entrusted to mortals have been given us to proclaim to the world. The proclamation of these truths is to be our work. The world is to be warned, and God’s people are to be true to the trust committed to them. . . .

“We are to be consecrated channels, through which the heavenly life is to flow to others. The Holy

Spirit is to animate and pervade the whole church, purifying and cementing hearts. Those who have been buried with Christ in baptism are to rise to newness of life, giving a living representation of the life of Christ. Upon us is laid a sacred charge. . . . [We] are dedicated to the work of making known the gospel of salvation. Heaven’s perfection is to be your power.”⁶

DISCIPLE-MAKING: A PROCESS

Making disciples is a process. It is more than presenting a series of evangelistic meetings, as vital as they are. It is more than feeding the homeless, cleaning up a neighborhood, doing a health fair, or giving Bible studies, as important as these activities may be.

The first step in the discipleship process is becoming disciples ourselves. “We must study the Pattern and become like Jesus, who was meek and lowly of heart, pure and undefiled.”⁷ The way we do that is by spending time with Him each day—studying His Word, contemplating its meaning, communing with Him through prayer, and by His power, surrendering all to Him and obeying His commands. The grace of Christ is a transforming power, changing us from being hearers to doers of the Word of God.

The next step, as revealed in the life of the early disciples, is to share with others what we ourselves have experienced—what we have seen and heard through our walk with Jesus, inviting them to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8). And once they give their lives to Him in baptism, these new ones in the faith are still in need of discipling through mentorship by more experienced disciples in the faith.

An excellent resource in outlining the full discipleship and mentoring process has been produced by the Sabbath School and

Personal Ministries Department of the General Conference. Titled *Discipleship Handbook: A Resource for Seventh-day Adventist Church Members* (available in 30 languages!), this practical and succinct book will be a tremendous blessing to new and longtime members alike.

Just as it was in New Testament times, carrying out the mission of the church involves everyone—not just the pastors, evangelists, and other leaders. God invites us all, through His power, to become disciples of Christ, then go and make disciples for Him. Jesus is coming. Get involved! ☺

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898, 1940), p. 818.

² Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1911), p. 18.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 19.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Spirit of Prophecy* (Battle Creek, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Pub. Assn., 1878), vol. 3, p. 323.

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 9, pp. 19, 20.

⁷ Ellen G. White, in *Signs of the Times*, Apr. 20, 1891.

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Questions for Reflection

1. How can I prioritize personal time with Christ so as to be familiar with His voice and instruction in my life?
2. Are you more like Dorcas and her quiet acts of service or Paul, boldly sharing principles of truth?
3. Is there someone in your local church to whom you can come close, providing support and nurture in their walk with Christ?