

Sunday, June 15, 2014: Matthew 28:16-20

Go and make disciples? More like wait and welcome converts.

by [Jennifer E. Copeland](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue

Baptize, teach, remember. With such basic instructions, I wonder how church got so complicated. We have committees and boards, initiatives and task forces, councils and conferences, doctrines and dogmas. We even have trials to enforce it all.

This bureaucracy may have something to do with how we refine and revise our processes. New procedures are built on what came before. When we want to reform, we go back only as far as the last thing—more like renovating than reforming. We never go all the way back to the basic building block, a true remodeling project.

Basing our latest, greatest ideas on the most recent idea, which apparently wasn't so great or we wouldn't be revising it, runs the risk of continuing down a path that is already off course. This just puts us farther afield. A few centuries of this and before we know it, we don't recall the basics, much less the reasons for implementing them. Most of us can think of any number of issues currently debated within church judicatories where we "strain out a gnat but swallow a camel."

The students on the campus where I work have a notorious practice of lining up for certain basketball games months in advance. They pitch tents in early January for a game that is sometimes not played until March. The rules for "tenting" are elaborate, and amending them each season consumes the bulk of student government legislative sessions. We have tent quotas, tent checks, line monitors, and severe weather policies for those nights when voluntary exposure to the elements must be overruled by common sense.

Over the years the policies for tenting have become more important than the purpose. The purpose is to get a good seat for an exciting basketball game, but by game day many people are too sick, exhausted, or inebriated to care about the game. Tenting for the game has replaced watching the game. Church initiatives

often suffer from some of the same malaise. We have occluded the basic imperative with our next great idea for improvement.

The basic church growth plan Jesus offers is refreshingly simple: “Go and make disciples.” Over the years, our favorite construction model has become instead “wait and welcome converts.” Because we want to extend the utmost in hospitality to those we are waiting for, we pour unbounded resources into the place where we wait. We wait in the comfort of our climate-

controlled sanctuaries. When newcomers arrive we provide extensive programming options ranging across the spectrum of human need. And we employ a passel of people to keep it all running.

Alas, the converts are not showing up for us to make disciples of them. Cavernous sanctuaries, spacious family life centers, hallways of Sunday school rooms sit empty all week long and are increasingly empty on Sunday morning, too. To solve the emptiness problem, we fix up these vacant places and hire more people to plan more programs. Some of us do this until the money runs out.

But Jesus never said, “If you build it, they will come.” He said, “Go.” The first action of going is to baptize—and Jesus knows firsthand what can happen to a person right after baptism. Rather than the sentimental family affair we usually imagine, baptism as Jesus experienced it propels us into wilderness wandering, where we can be prepared for a life of countercultural behavior that will lead to the foot of the cross.

Baptism might be another practice whose purpose we’ve lost sight of. At the local level, we’ve spent time trying to figure out how to keep fussy infants content before we pour water over their heads, which is guaranteed to make them malcontent. At the denominational level, we’ve spent years tweaking the liturgy and refining the creedal claims. All the while, we neglect to mention that baptism is risky business, not just a great family photo op. This riskiness is the first act of going.

Because risk taking should not be entered into unadvisedly, Jesus’ next directive is “teach.” Baptism, a dowse of water that quickly dries, marks the beginning of learning how to live baptized lives. Consider that the leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference spent hours teaching their members the art of nonviolent resistance before ever allowing them to sit down at a lunch counter or march across a bridge. It takes some time to learn how to face billy clubs, barking dogs, and fire hoses.

Disciples have to be taught how to follow Jesus—and there's no guarantee we'll pass the test. After years of following Jesus, even the 12 named disciples had two colossal failures at test time. Before the night ended, one died by his own hand without the chance for a retake. Another got a second chance and went on to tend the lambs, tend the sheep, and feed the sheep. He became so good at this that he died the same way as the one who had taught him. Living faithfully takes practice.

This tough course of baptizing and teaching can be sustained only if we also remember. We must always remember why we wait in line, why we baptize and teach. Without the memory that Jesus is with us always, to the end of the age, we will quickly align ourselves with the next novel thing coming up the street. Without gathering around the table to remember the lesson of self-giving love, we will soon succumb to the louder voices of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Without focusing on the basic instructions, we will lose track of our purpose. We must remember to go, because going is how it all begins.