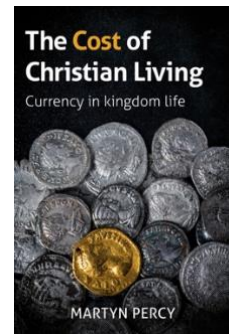


What3words? Go, Make, Disciples: Clarifications

By Martyn Percy

Building on some of the themes explored in his book, [The Cost of Christian Living](#) (BRF Ministries, 2025), Martyn Percy addresses how a significant number of churches in the developed world have struggled with declining attendance during the post-war era and how, in light of this, many leaders within historic Protestant denominations – and that includes the Church of England – have turned to a rhetoric of discipleship to try and offset this trend, in part seeking to explicitly incorporate the laity into the work of maintenance and mission. This article, as a discussion starter and position paper, explains why an appeal to discipleship is misconceived and explains what ‘The great commission’ (Matthew 28) was originally concerned with.



It is possible to navigate and find your bearings using just three words. Enter your location into the What3words system and a unique preassigned three-word code will identify the precise three-metre square of ground you are on. Currently, mine is: class, lunch, march. Yet the What3words app for locating and navigation in the church these days seems to be: go, make, disciples. My question for the churches is: ‘How *faithful* is this as a direction?’

As will be apparent in these notes, I take issue with the prevailing credo and dogma that asserts the primary calling of the church is to grow, and the primary calling of Christians is to ‘make (more) disciples’. What is so beguiling about such social, missional and spiritual constructions of reality is that this seems obvious and incontrovertible in the face of declining congregations in the northern hemisphere (across all traditions, and even among evangelicals and charismatics, with more indications of stalling than success). But we should be particularly alert at precisely such moments, for the most obvious solutions to theological and ecclesial conundrums can often flirt with or be subsumed into subtle heresies.

Let me give one small example here, the namely relatively recent (on-trend) invocation from many bishops for Christians to be more ‘Jesus-shaped’, and the church to be likewise, or ‘mission-shaped’. Leaving aside what weight and interpretation to give to the word ‘shaped’ – i.e. surely not physical, but if spiritual or characterful, then how, exactly? – the obvious problem with ‘becoming a different shape’ to the one we have, is that it assumes a high level of personal agency. In the simplest physical terms, few of us can do much about our height. Our weight, or the lack of it – ranging from obesity to starvation – are often the result of complex social, economic and political contexts. Obesity is a disease of the poor; and starvation is most certainly the same.

Can anyone become any shape they like? In a word, no. Those with the power to alter their appearance are most likely be wealthy, secure and privileged. As Luzia Sutter Rehmann has argued so compelling in her *Rage in the Belly: Hunger in the New Testament* (Cascade, 2021), hunger, rage

and the shape of society are powerfully interconnected in today's world, and more so in the time of Jesus. The dynamics of hunger, starvation, famine, plenty, greed, harvest, drought and social unrest over food shaped the world that Jesus knew. We, in the northern hemisphere, lack a 'hermeneutic of hunger' with which to read the gospels. As we do not know hunger ourselves, we forget how much of Jesus' life-shape revolved around his hunger and thirst, and that of others, especially the poor.

We simply forget that when John the Baptist ate locusts (Matthew 3:4 which the KJV tells us was 'his meat') and almost certainly out of sheer desperation. Locusts are normally only common and plentiful in times of famine. We perhaps forget that following Leviticus 11:20–23 there are only eight types of locust that are kosher. The *Talmud* also informs us, helpfully, that there are over 800 non-kosher species of grasshoppers and locusts. So, for every hundred, only one can be eaten. And as locusts swarm, it is quite likely that the entire clouds of them, though nutritious, will be prohibited sources of protein. So, in mentioning that 'locusts were his meat', we are introduced to a perpetually hungry man in an age of food shortages, regular famines and economic austerity.

The heresy embedded in the assumption that we can make ourselves more 'Jesus-shaped' stems from Nestorianism and Pelagianism. The former heresy tended to uncouple the humanity and divinity of Jesus. The latter heresy promoted the idea that by the exercise of our moral discipline, Christians could contribute to shaping their eternal salvation. But if we live by grace alone, we will be what God makes us. To aspire to be 'Jesus-shaped' or belong to a church that is more 'mission-shaped' is strangely reminiscent of classical 19th-century liberal theologies that went off on searches and pilgrimages to find the authentic 'historical Jesus', only to discover when they found this Jesus, he looked remarkably similar to the pilgrim-explorers. Indeed, the 'historical Jesus' and his church bore uncanny resemblances to those people who had gone searching in the first place. Ecclesiology is only our Christology worked out in practice. Mission is encountering the Spirit within and beyond the church. Who we think Jesus is and how we encounter and experience his transformation of us is what leads to the formation of the church. Likewise, how a congregation senses, understands, reflects upon and reifies the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of God is what church is. Priorities, prayer, worship, study, hospitality, community building, receptivity, kindness, care, love, joy and peace-building will all flow from this. No church can ever be more than a fallen, fragile and flawed manifestation of Christ.

There is a small but growing resistance to the mechanistic-productive models of the church that have dominated popular approaches to ecclesiology, mission and ministry in the post-war era. Daniel Guder's missiological and ecclesial assessment articulates what many critics of the church growth movement are thinking. Namely, that for all the apparent success, there is an underlying functionalism that may be doing significant damage to the organic nature of ecclesial polity. The apparent success may, in fact, turn out to be a significant betrayal of identity, and undermine the actual mission of the church:

'The more the Church is treated as an organization, the more its mission becomes focused on techniques designed to maximize output and productivity. We become obsessed with quantity instead of quality, and where we have a care for quality, it is only to serve the larger goal of increasing quantity. The Church moves to becoming a managed machine, with its managers judging their performance by growth-related metrics.'

Darrell Guder, *Called to Witness: Doing missional theology* (Eerdmans, 2015), p. 37.

The call to return to models of local, organic, authentic and small-scale parishes that are rooted and grounded in their contexts is still only a movement with a faint pulse. However, I sense that the mechanistic-productive model is ageing, failing and losing its agency – though cultural-missional

hubris, a lack of theological wisdom and deteriorating spiritual self-awareness masks this from its proponents.

For an illustration of this, the Archbishop of York's address at the 2022 Lambeth Conference is even more revealing:

'McDonalds make hamburgers. Starbucks make coffee... Heineken make beer. Toyota make cars. Rolex make watches... and sisters and brothers, the Church of Jesus Christ makes disciples. That is our core business. That is what we are about. Not just converts. Jesus doesn't say go into the world and make converts. He doesn't say go into the world and make churchgoers. He says "make disciples, followers of Jesus...".'

'Lambeth Conference plenary – mission and evangelism', archbishopofyork.org/speaking-and-writing/sermons/lambeth-conference-plenary-mission-and-evangelism.

The archepiscopal stress is placed on productivity, but with the bishops (to paraphrase Marx) controlling the means of production. True, Marx said it was the 'workers' who controlled the means of production, and I daresay the archbishop hopes it will be the laity – his workers – who will deliver on the targets he sets, with all increased productivity lightly supervised and energised by compliant clergy. Here, the robotic, simplistic and mechanistic analogy for the church imagines a seamless linearity between raw material, goods produced and consumer take-up. Of course, this is not exactly what Marx had in mind in the *Communist Manifesto*, where the workers, post-revolution, were to be accorded equality in deciding on production priorities and outputs, and otherwise have full agency in their economic, political and social self-determination.

True, we might well hope that disciples could be an objective, or even – we hope – a consequence of the mission of the church. However, disciples are not the 'product' or the 'output', as it were, of what the churches are offering. That would be tantamount to claiming that the purpose and product of a business was satisfied customers. That is plainly wrong. The product is the goods or services that the business provides, based on its purposes, which only then might lead to customers' being satisfied.

There are other reasons to query the consumerist-production model of discipleship proffered by the archbishop. Leaving aside the morally ambivalent histories of these mega-corporations (e.g. lack of union rights for workers and low pay; participation in making military hardware for the axis-powers in WWII; alcohol, addiction and sports sponsorship, with links to gambling, etc.), the archbishop seems to have read the commission of Matthew 28 as any 21st-century culturally relative consumer might, and certainly with very little theological insight.

For example, the archbishop in his exegesis assumes that 'make disciples' is 'make' in the sense of manufacture, produce or multiply. A momentary expository pause would suggest that even when just taking an English translation, other things one can "make" include apologies, peace, excuses or even 'make good'. Surely the task of the church is not to 'make' anything, but first and foremost to 'bear witness'.

The witness of such a church might lead to depletion, colossal persecution and martyrdom. Or, a sustained period of being unfashionable and not the flavour of the month, year, or even decade. That sort of season would put most companies out of business. And the church is not a business. But if productivity is now being made 'core' to the identity and integrity of the church, it will collapse into becoming little more than a business. (Incidentally, very few businesses ever last a hundred years, let alone two thousand). The temptation to read Matthew 28 in the light of some mechanistic-

productive lens continues to dominate evangelicalism, and shape the weaker Protestant churches (such as Anglicanism) that feed off such diets.

The Greek word-phrase, in fact, for ‘make disciples’ only occurs in three other places in the New Testament (*mathēteúō*, which comes from *mathētēs*, meaning ‘disciple’). In all cases, the Greek alludes to an established teacher-learner relationship, more usually associated with lengthy periods of apprenticeship and education. Furthermore, and this should perhaps be obvious, very few followers of Jesus were disciples. But all disciples were followers. The text, therefore, is not about conversion of the masses. Rather, it is about educating the few (i.e., the disciples) in order to reach outside the realms of Galilee and Jerusalem (‘the nations’).

Likewise, ‘go and make disciples...’ would be better rendered as ‘in your going’ or ‘as you return/depart back to Jerusalem, remember to...’ This commission from Jesus links to the earlier one in the upper room, and the call to the disciples here is to shift their mission from being ethnocentric to becoming *ektocentric* – outward-facing and global, and now a faith that is no longer concerned with remaining within Judaism. True, the disciples will return to ‘the temple’ to praise God. But their task is now to reach beyond the temple, just as Jesus witnessed to Gentiles.

Any notion that this passage can sustain and support an exegesis that christens ‘mass production’, extensive evangelism and conversion as the primary intent is absurd. Let alone this being *the* ‘Great Commission’ Jesus signs off with. It is not original to the biblical text. The ‘Great Commission’ is clearly an added subtitle that crept into many translations during the era of intense missionary and colonial endeavour in the early nineteenth century. This subtitle did not feature in earlier translations of scripture, and nor does it debut as a phrase with earlier generations of missionaries.

In actual fact, Matthew 28 makes no mention of conversion, though careful readers of the passage will note that there is an order outlined for disciples as they go about their way. First, baptise them. Second, teach them to observe those things that are needed in following Jesus. Every disciple is a Christian. But not every Christian is a disciple. Just as every apostle was a follower, but not every follower was an apostle. Here I think the archbishop would agree. Just as everyone who drives a car or needs to tell the time, need not own a Rolex or drive a Toyota.

The mechanistic-productive model of the church is a temptation, to be sure. Especially in times of sparsity, when the church only seems to experience increasing decline and disinterest. But there is less scriptural warrant for church-growth-centric ecclesial paradigms than many suppose, and Matthew 28 is not the conversionist or production-orientated text the archbishop imagines this scripture prescribes. Christianity is a discipline, vocation and joy as practised. Few of those who practice it will ever see easy and obvious productive outcomes. The church is tasked with learning the Christological grammar that rules faithful speech and thought about the person and nature of Jesus Christ.

This might seem to be sufficient as a critique; in effect framing church growth thinking within the ecology of capitalism. But Bishop Lesslie Newbigin turns the critique into something altogether more surprising:

‘Modern capitalism has created a world totally different from anything known before. Previous ages have assumed that resources are limited and that economics – housekeeping – is about how to distribute them fairly. Since Adam Smith, we have learned to assume that exponential growth is the basic law of economics and that no limits can be set to it.’

Leslie Newbigin, Foolishness to the Greeks (SPCK, 1986), p. 38.

The result is that increased production has become an end in itself; products are designed to become rapidly obsolete. Newbigin continues:

‘Growth is for the sake of growth and is not determined by any overarching social purpose. And that, of course, is an exact account of the phenomenon which, when it occurs in the human body, is called cancer. In the long perspective of history, it would be difficult to deny that the exuberant capitalism of the past 250 years will be diagnosed in the future as a desperately dangerous case of cancer in the body of human society – if indeed this cancer has not been terminal and there are actually survivors around to make the diagnosis.’

Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks* (SPCK, 1986), p. 38.

For Christians, living is bound up in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, our own lives are to be, in a real sense, lived sacrificially and vicariously. In John 12:24, we are reminded that a grain of wheat must fall for there to be new and greater growth. As is so often the case with the scriptures, translation and passage of time do not always serve us well. The Greek word John gives us is not ‘dies’, but rather ‘decays’ or ‘rots’. Moreover, the seed does not actually ‘die’. It is dormant once separated from the stalk (‘falls into the earth’), and it is only when the kernel begins to decay that the seed can germinate. Put another way, Jesus does not speak of a lifeless death in John 12. Instead, he invites us to ponder what must decay and rot in order to enhance some more abundant life. That means letting go of linear, agribusiness mechanistic-productive models of church growth, and re-engaging with the seasonal cycles of organic life (and death) that yield faithful fecundity. Likewise, the version of the beatitudes from Matthew 5:13, Jesus is recorded as saying:

‘You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.’

In interpreting this text, most preachers and many Bible commentaries work with a false assumption: that the ‘salt’ in this text is the white granular chemical we know as sodium chloride, normally found in a condiment set or kitchen cupboard, where its purpose is to add flavour to foods, or occasionally to act as a purifier or preservative.

Yet the fact that Jesus refers to ‘the salt of the earth’ ought to immediately alert us to another meaning for the text. The ‘salt’ (*halas*) mentioned in the text is hardly likely to be table salt, since it is chemical and culinary improbability that sodium chloride will lose its flavour. Any salt that is extracted from food, water or any other substance remains ‘salty’; even if it loses its form, it retains its essence, as many a spoilt meal and frustrated chef can bear witness. And why, when ‘salt’ is mentioned in Luke 14:34, it is to be consigned to the ‘manure heap’ when it loses its strength?

The clue lies in understanding the ‘earth’ and ‘salt’ that Jesus is talking about. The substance of Jesus’ words are, in Greek, *to halas tes ges* (‘the salt of the earth’) with the word for ‘earth’ here not referring to the world at all, but rather to soil. In other words, the ‘salt’ that Jesus is referring to here is probably a kind of salt-like material or mineral such as potash or phosphate. These *halas* elements were available in abundance in and around the Dead Sea area of Palestine, and were used for fertilising the land and enriching the manure pile, which was then spread on the land.

The empowering mission of the church, like the salt of Jesus’ parable, has a consistency of power. However, that power, enculturated into contexts, does not lead to uniformity. The soil – whatever kind it is – is respected, but also enabled. Different soils become more productive for what they are sustaining and growing. Jesus’ salt brings growth and flourishing to all kinds of earth. This salt has always to respect the type of earth in which it is situated. Diverse cultural sensibilities have to be

taken into account in the mission of the church. Even when the soil might be inhospitable – rocky, thorny and adversely affected by climatic conditions – it is still given. Even where the task of being the salt of the earth is so much more demanding and slow it can still be transformative, given time. The primary problem with Christians ‘making’ disciples is that the embedded notions of manufacture, commodification and the replacement of unity with machined uniformity are hard to escape. They are ‘baked in’ to the formulaic conceptuality. Interestingly, a growing number of teachers in homiletics, ministry studies and pastoral theology have been helped by the work of Wendell Berry and his writings on land, agriculture and attention to the local.

As proponents of small, authentic, organic-local churches have consistently argued, it is when the local church lives out this vocation faithfully that the congregations and parishes are encountered as genuine, authentic and transformative. They are faithful expressions of their local community, and of the Spirit of Christ. In their incarnation, they become incorporative.

To conclude, there is a great commandment, and this is the only one that Jesus affirms as ‘great’ and mandatory:

He [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’

Matthew 22:37–40

Love is the greatest. And this is a reminder, perhaps, that there are many, many kinds of commission in the gospels and in the rest of the New Testament. Some of them instruct disciples on what not to wear, how much money to carry and what to do in the event of hospitality being refused (something to do with dust and shoes). None of these commissions are greater than the others. We would find it rather odd if the Archbishop of York instructed Anglicans as per Luke 22:36: ‘[Jesus] said to them, “But now, the one who has a purse must take it, and likewise a bag. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one.”’ Yet that is a very clear commission.

So, the gospel is the seed. We may be the kernel. Yet if so, we have no real use other than to become detached from the sap-giving stem, and to fall. Yet we cling on for dear life. Even though we know that we need to learn to fall, be cracked open and slowly decay so that the seed can germinate. We are not the seed. We are not the gospel. We are like the ‘salt’ of Jesus’ analogy: just useful fertiliser from which can nourish the soil and allow God to give the growth (1 Corinthians 3:5–9). Fertiliser needs to spread around and dug in. It is not the job of the kernel to choose where it falls. We cannot ‘go’ anywhere. Nor do we ‘make’ disciples. We are where we are. We need to surrender to God, and yield ourselves to God’s will, and be the best salt or kernel we can for the seed, the word of God. It is pure hubris and poor theology to suggest followers, converts, disciples of apostles have any other calling.

The resurrection is a tap-and-go affair, and Christ’s kingdom is a cashless economy. Don’t be fooled by those who want to commodify discipleship. Grace is free. God’s love is free. Anything you get in turn for your outlay is a graced bonus. But it isn’t yours. Nor does it belong to the church. Authentic mission has got nothing whatsoever to do with reification or rewards. At its best, it is utterly and lovingly wasteful. Just like God.

My What3words app offers no one-metre-square location on the planet corresponding to ‘go.make.disciples’. That address is unknown – not a point of departure, let alone any destination.

In the meantime, the calling for all Christians is to love, surrender, serve – and to be dug into the ground where God has placed us. It is what Jesus did. It is a profoundly embodied and organic vision. Jesus asks us all to surrender, likewise.

Marytn Percy

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