

# Keeping On Target

## Matthew 28:16-20

### INTRODUCTION

Charles Paul Conn is the president of Lee University in Cleveland, TN. In one of his books, he tells the story of a rather unusual phone call he made while on a business trip to Atlanta. He had been browsing through the Yellow Pages (which gives you an idea of how long ago this trip was) and noticed a listing for a restaurant called "The Church of God Grill."

Curious about the odd name, he dialed the number. The cheery voice on the other end of the line answered "Hello. Church of God Grill." It turned out that the man who answered the phone was the owner, so Dr. Conn asked him how the diner had been given such an unusual name.

*"Well," said the man, "We had this little church down here and, well, you know how it goes, over the years our attendance started to decline and it got harder and harder to pay the bills, so we started selling chicken dinners after church. At first we sold them to our members, but word got out and other people started to put in orders. People really liked the chicken, and we were doing such a good business, that we needed more time to cook all the food. So naturally we decided to cut back on the church service. And after a while we just closed down the church altogether and kept on serving the chicken dinners. We just kept the name we started with, and that's why we're called "The Church of God Grill."*

Dr. Conn writes:

*What's the moral of this story? Churches that do not have a clear sense of their divine purpose will simply drift toward pleasing the greatest number of people.*

We hear those stories and we read a statement like that and it's very easy to say,

*"Those people were nuts! Closing a church just to make chicken! Don't they get it? Haven't they ever heard of the Great Commission?"*

But as I say those words I hear the voice of my dear mother calling from her grave. As I've said before, there came a point in time when Mom couldn't spank hard enough to get her message through my backside, so when she wanted me to feel real, deep pain, she would quote poetry. One of her favorites was:

*O wad some Power the giffie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!  
It wad frae mony a blunder free us...  
(Robert Burns, To a Louse, 1786)*

In English that means whenever you start to criticize someone else, first look at yourself. You might discover you aren't all that different.

### **Problem #1: The problem with nibbling**

I'll describe the first problem as "the problem with nibbling."

Luke 15 has three wonderful parables about getting lost (lost sheep, lost coin, lost boy).

- The lost boy (prodigal son) gets lost because of a willful decision he made one day. He announced to his father "I don't want to be a part of this family anymore." He packed up his things and purposefully walked away from the father.
  - That isn't typically how churches get off track. No one stands up in a congregational meeting and says "I move we no longer follow the Great Commission."
- The lost coin gets lost because its owner was careless.
  - Churches can get off track that way when leadership just isn't paying attention. But usually within a team of leaders, someone will be more careful than the rest.
- The lost sheep gets lost by nibbling. You see, when sheep are grazing they don't lift their heads to keep an eye on the shepherd. They are focused on the grass. Here's a tuft, here's another tuft and another and so on. When they finally do look up, they find themselves separated from the rest of the flock.
  - Nibbling is a big problem for Christians, both individually and collectively.
    - Individually we skip a worship service here, a quiet time there, our prayer time every now and then, and before long we find ourselves opting to sleep in on Sundays and find dust piling up on our Bibles.
    - But collectively churches begin to nibble on a variety of pleasant and harmless activities and before long the calendar is filled with things that don't produce disciples and organizations within the structure become little more than social clubs.

That's what Dr. Conn called the "simple drift." No overt intention involved. The church, over time, drifts away from its focus on the Great Commission. No one kept the church on target.

### **Problem #2: The problem with numbers**

Let me describe the second problem as "the problem with numbers."

You will never hear me say that tracking numbers is a bad thing. I'm all about watching for trends. But sometimes in a church numbers become the most important thing.

Churches aren't the only place where that happens.

- Thad Matta was fired as the head basketball coach at Ohio State this week. His program wasn't winning enough.

- Colleges and universities are under tremendous pressure to increase student enrollment because numbers have to be at certain levels in order to make budget.
- Salesmen understand quotas. Do want to buy a car? Shop at the end of the month.

When numbers become the most important measurement, an organization will do whatever it takes to get the numbers.

- There is a Lutheran congregation in our Ohio Mission region that is controlled by a family of about 40 people – controlled to the point that they don't allow anything to happen without their approval. The rest of the congregation doesn't do anything about it because, in their minds, they can't afford to lose 40 people. They don't want to take that risk.

You see, it's quite natural for an organization like the church to attract people who are similar to each other. That's a natural sociological phenomenon. It's also deadly to the local congregation's commitment to the Great Commission. Such organizations begin to focus inward on themselves and their needs.

When that happens, the Great Commission becomes of secondary importance. When church becomes all about our needs, and our comfort, and our preferences, and our expectations, we lose sight of our assignment to go out and make disciples of those who are currently not disciples and who may not be anything like us.

That's what Dr. Conn meant when we warned about churches that seek to please the greatest number of people. He was talking about the people inside, not the lost people outside.

So what's the answer? How do you keep this church from becoming a very large chicken grill?

- By keeping ourselves on target.
- By keeping the Great Commission as the highest and only priority of the church.
- By making ourselves and our preferences secondary to the purpose for which we the church have been created.

Our text cannot be clearer. The church has one mission:

*Therefore go and **make disciples** of all nations ... (Matthew 28:19a)*

One mission: Make disciples.

The text also breaks that mission down into two components:

*baptizing them ... and teaching them ...*

### **Component #1: Baptizing them**

No matter what your faith tradition is, the rite of baptism is always connected to the reality of a faith relationship with Jesus Christ.

There are four major views about baptism. Every one of them believes baptism means that I am God's and He is mine. We spend far too much time talking about the differences in our belief systems and too little time acknowledging that the one baptized is a child of God.

When you boil it all down to its essential essence, baptism is about getting people into a saving relationship. So when the text says:

*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 ... (Matthew 28:19)*

It is saying that the church needs to be bringing people to Jesus and bringing Jesus to the people. That's not a numbers game, because it is not about increasing the average attendance of a local congregation, it's about increasing the eternal population of heaven.

## **Component #2: Teaching them**

Once those people have come into a relationship with Jesus, the second component begins... teaching them how live like a Christian. It is not filling their heads with knowledge, but helping them transform their lives so that they think like, talk like, act like Jesus Himself.

It's not just teaching them ... but teaching them to **obey** everything ...

That is why Martin Luther and other theologians through the centuries have said things like this:

*If your faith in Christ hasn't caused you to modify your life, you probably aren't a Christian.*

Jesus Himself said that our hungering and thirsting wasn't to be about gaining more knowledge, but gaining more righteousness:

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6)*

## **APPLICATION**

Anything that the church does that does not result in the making of a disciple is nibbling and numbers, and it is a reflection of a church's failure to uphold the Great Commission.