

**Mathetaical Ecclesiology: An Exegetical Examination
of Disciples as the Building Blocks of the Church**

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Introduction

When Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church,” it initially appears, as many would contend, that He did not specify how He would carry out that building process. However, Jesus does give an explicit command in Matthew 28:16-20 for the eleven disciples (*mathētai*) to make other disciples (*mathēteuo*). Could it be, then, that the Matthean version of the Great Commission¹ is, in fact, the way in which Christ intended to carry out his church-building process?

Due to insufficient exegetical data, it may not be possible to test that assertion from the Gospels themselves. However, the following exegetical/theological conclusion is quite clear from a comparison of a number of relevant passages in Acts: *The church (ekklēsia) that Christ predicted He would build in the Gospels is seen in Acts to be composed of the building blocks of disciples (mathētai) fashioned according to the steps of Christ's Commission.*

Simply put, this means that, in Acts, the term “church” is synonymous with the “disciples” gathered corporately. Simultaneously, the “disciples,” as individual followers of Jesus, are the “church,” primarily viewed as scattered for ministry or by persecution.

The Great Commission: Jesus' Commanded Church Building Process

It is an understatement to say that Matthew 28:16-20 stands as a key passage in the Gospel. After all, it is the climax of Matthew's resurrection narrative and the conclusion to the entire Gospel. Of Matthew 28:16-20, Hagner says, “[H]ere [the disciples] receive their commission in the famous words that have become the hallmark of the Gospel of Matthew. For

¹ There are actually various statements of the Great Commission in each of the Gospels (i.e., Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15; Lk 24:46-48; Jn 20:21 and in Acts (i.e., 1:8). Of these five Commission statements, the one most commonly referred to as *the* Great Commission is unquestionably Mt 28:19-20, particularly focusing on the imperative “make disciples.”

these words, perhaps more than any others, distill the outlook and various emphases of the Gospel.”²

Verses 16-20 read:

But the eleven *disciples* proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "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 the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."³

Verse 16 makes it clear that Jesus is addressing the eleven disciples, those remaining of his twelve closest followers, and, after explaining to them that he has been given all authority, Jesus gives them one command, *mathēteusate*, “you (pl.) make disciples” (v. 19). This is the only imperative verb in verses 19-20 and is thus the primary focus of the entire Commission. This command (i.e., to “make disciples”) is accomplished by the means of the action of the three participles in 19-20, *poreuthentes*, go(ing), *baptizontes*, baptizing, and *didaskontes*, teaching.

While it is the contention of some that these participles, because they are syntactically subordinate to *mathēteusate*, take on the force of the force of an imperative,⁴ it is exegetically

² Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, Word Biblical Commentary, v. 33B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 881.

³ All Scripture quotations from the NASB 1995 unless otherwise noted. Discussion of the Great Commission is often limited to verses 18 or 19 – 20, but it is important to include verse 16 in order to see that the command to make disciples is specifically given to disciples, the eleven.

⁴ Cf., e.g., Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*.

preferable to understand them as spelling out the process of what it means to *make disciples*.⁵

While it may be correct to translate *poreuthentes* as an imperative “go,” as is done in most English translations, since it is in the emphatic position and the command to make disciples can’t even begin until one goes (i.e., evangelistically), it still is not equal in force to the imperative “make disciples.” Since last words are lasting words, *Mathēteusate*, then, as the concluding command in the concluding pericope of the entire 28 chapters of Matthew’s gospel, is of utmost importance.

A further very important aspect of Matthew 28:16-20 is its theological location in the post-resurrection period. Jesus clearly undertook to make disciples during his ministry in a manner similar to what he commands his followers to do. This is especially evident from passages such as John 4:1, which says, “...the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing (*mathētas poiei kai baptizei*) more disciples than John.”

However, it is crucial to observe that all of Jesus’ disciple making activities were carried out prior to his death and resurrection, which, theologically, can most accurately be described as the “twilight of the Old Covenant.” The Matthean Commission, by contrast, takes place after the cross/resurrection, which is the beginning of the transition to the New Covenant (cf. Luke 22:20 [“the New Covenant in My blood”]). So, even though Jesus, the maker of the New Covenant, was already on the scene, all the Gospel narratives take place under the Old Covenant theologically until the post-Resurrection setting. And, even then, it’s not until Pentecost that the promised power source of the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit (cf. Ezekiel 36:26-27), is poured out.

⁵ E.g., David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 689–691; See also R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007).

Of course, it is through the empowerment of the Spirit that the Great Commission is to be carried out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Thus, it is fair to conclude that the steps of Jesus' disciple making activities that He chose to continue into the New Covenant, then, are commanded to be carried out in the new era ahead in a way similar—but not identical—to what he himself did in the conclusion of the Old Covenant era. This can be seen in the making of disciples/building the church in the book of Acts.

Jesus' disciple/church building process carried out in Acts

Several passages in the book of Acts demonstrate that the church Jesus intended to be built is, in fact, composed of disciples. An examination of these passages will show this to be the case.

Acts 5:11 and 6:1 - And great fear came over the whole *church*, and over all who heard of these things...Now at this time while the *disciples* were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

Acts 5:11 contains the first use of the word “church” (*ekklēsia*) in the book of Acts. The context indicates that this “whole church” over which the fear came due to the death of Ananias and Sapphira was the entirety of those who believed on Christ and were gathering together and sharing everything in common. In the following verses more believers are added to the Lord while Peter and the other apostles are performing signs and are threatened by the Jewish authorities.

Then, in 6:1, this same group that is referred to as the church in 5:11 is denoted as the “disciples” (*mathētai*). This is, interestingly, the first instance of this word *mathētai* in Acts as well. It seems that “church” is used in 5:11 as the way to indicate the group as a whole, while “disciples” is used in 6:1 because a more individual perspective of the group is warranted by the distinction being discussed between the Hellenist and Hebrew disciples/members of the church.

It is worth noting also that the immediately following use of *mathētai* in 6:2 is in conjunction with *plēthos*, which, in some translations, is rendered “congregation.” It is even possible in this and some other passages in Acts for *plēthos* to be understood as a virtual equivalent term to *ekklēsia*.⁶

Acts 6:7, 8:1, 8:3, 9:1 - The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem...; Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles; But Saul began ravaging the church, entering house after house, and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison.; Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest.

After the seven *diakanoi* are appointed at the beginning of chapter 6, verse 7 tells of the number of “disciples” increasing in Jerusalem. After Stephen is seized and gives his speech (6:8-7:60), Luke then refers to the group of believers in Jerusalem in 8:1 and 8:3 as the “church,” whom Saul is persecuting. In 9:1, then, after many of the “church” were scattered, Saul continues “breathing threats and murder” against them, but they are here referred to as “disciples

⁶ Cf. F.W. Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

of the Lord. Thus, it is clear that, in these verses, Luke uses both *mathētai* and *ekklēsia* to refer to the same people in Jerusalem being persecuted, especially by Saul.

9:10, 19b, 25, 26, 31 – Now there was a *disciple* at Damascus named Ananias...; Now for several days he [Saul] was with the *disciples* who were at Damascus; but his *disciples* took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket; When he came to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the *disciples*, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a *disciple*...; So the *church* throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Throughout chapter 9, those who believed on Christ are repeatedly referred to as “disciples.” This includes Ananias, who was sent by the Lord to Saul, those with whom Saul associates after his conversion and who help him escape from Damascus, and the believers in Jerusalem he tried to associate with when he arrived there. *Mathētēs* is even used here, though in a somewhat indirect way, to refer to Saul himself, who, after the scales fell from his eyes, was immediately baptized, likely an echo of the Matthean disciple making process given in the Commission (28:19).

Then, somewhat abruptly in verse 31, Luke changes his language. Where one might have expected him to say, “So the *disciples* throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria...,” he actually says, “So the *church* throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria enjoyed peace...” Clearly referring to the same people he has called “disciples” throughout this pericope, Luke now refers to them as a whole by calling them the “church.”

Significantly, after Luke explains that they enjoyed peace after the departure of Saul to Tarsus, he also adds that the church was “being built up and going on in the fear of the Lord.” “Being built up,” *oikodoumenē*, is from the same verb used in Matthew 16:18. Given that this is the only use of the this theologically significant verb (*oikodomeo*) in Acts related to the church, it seems highly likely that there is here an echo of Jesus’ proclamation that he will build his church. That especially appears to be the case if one takes the view that, in Matt. 16:18, he is asserting that, on the confession that he is the Christ, Jesus will build his church. If this understanding is correct, then the wording “the church... being built up” in this context carries with it the implication that the church is being built up (at least largely) by the proclaiming of Jesus as the Christ (cf. Acts 9:28).

Acts 11:25-26 - And he [Barnabas] left for Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

In this short verse is perhaps some of the strongest evidence for Luke’s use of *mathētai* and *ekklēsia* as being virtually interchangeable. Here, he explains that Barnabas, after finding Saul in Tarsus, goes with him and meets with the church (referring to the corporate body) and teaches a great number of people there. Then, referring to the individuals in the church, he explains that these *disciples* in Antioch were the first to be called Christians.⁷

⁷ Here the reader sees that “Christians” is yet another interchangeable term for “disciples” and “church” in Acts, but one not used nearly as commonly as the other two.

Acts 14:20-23 – But while the *disciples* stood around him, he got up and entered the city. The next day he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many *disciples*, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the *disciples*, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every *church*, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

After Paul was stoned and left for dead at Lystra, he got up and left for Derbe with Barnabas and, significantly for this study, “made disciples” there. Then, they returned to the cities where they had already made disciples, in order to strengthen those believers and also to appoint leaders for them in each local church.

From an exegetical standpoint, it should be observed that here, though it is the exact same groups of people whom they made *disciples* of, strengthened, and appointed elders for, those groups are now referred to as corporate entities (i.e., local *churches*), and they have elders appointed for them. In addition to the clear use of disciples and church to reference the same people, Luke also uses the verb *mathēteuō*, the same verb that is the spotlighted command (“make disciples”) in Matthew’s Great Commission passage (which is highly noteworthy, as will be addressed further below).

Acts 14:27-28 – When they had arrived and gathered the *church* together, they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the *disciples*.

When Paul and Barnabas returned to Syrian Antioch, they gathered together the corporate entity—the *church*—to report what had taken place on their first missionary journey. Then, in talking about spending time with them, presumably on a more personal/individual basis, Luke explains that Paul and Barnabas spent a long time with the *disciples*. Once again, it is clear that “church” and “disciples” are used in this passage to refer to the same people—virtually interchangeably.

Acts 20:28-30 – Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Paul here admonishes the overseers, those responsible to shepherd the church of God in Ephesus. He then refers to “the church” as “the flock,”⁸ and explains that some of the members of that flock will be drawn away by “wolves.”⁹ Those members are specifically called “disciples.” The link may nowhere be clearer in Acts than it is in this passage that “church” and “disciples” refer to the same people.¹⁰

⁸ “Flock” is thus yet another lesser-used interchangeable term with “disciples,” “church” and “Christians” (see the discussion above on Acts 11:26). Another sparingly used interchangeable term is “the Way” (e.g., Acts 9:2).

⁹ That is, by false teachers (i.e., wolves in shepherds’ theological clothing, so to speak).

¹⁰ Though it is beyond the scope of this work, it is also interesting to note that this instance is found in a speech attributed to Paul. Though the style of the wording seems quite Lucan, there is no reason to believe Paul did not give this speech, and so it is possible that this evidences Paul’s use of *ekklēsia* and *mathētai* to refer to the same groups as well. Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary*, 1st American ed., The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1980), 328ff.

Luke's Lone Use of *Mathēteuō*

As mentioned above in the discussion of Acts 14:20-23, these verses offer considerable additional insight for this discussion, because Luke uses the same verb meaning “make disciples” as is found in the Great Commission in Matthew. Since *mathēteusate* is so exegetically significant in Matt. 28:16-20, a brief discussion of this word is warranted. *Mathēteuō* is used only four times in the NT, three of which are in Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 13:52, 27:57, 28:19) and once in the passage under examination, in Acts 14:21.

It stands to reason that the only non-Matthean usage of this verb, *and the only occurrence after Jesus gave his Great Commission*, would be especially significant. This instance seems to be a very clear echo by Luke of Matthew’s use of *mathēteuō* in 28:19. By specifically using this word and echoing Jesus’ Commission found in Matthew, which by no coincidence is on Paul’s *first* missionary journey, Luke is showing that the goal of making disciples given in Matthew is one and the same as building the church(es) of Christ.

Conclusion

From an examination of the representative passages discussed in this paper, it is clear that, in the book of Acts, the church (*ekklēsia*) is synonymous with a group of disciples. Likewise, it is also evident that disciples (*mathētai*) are, though viewed/discussed from an individualized perspective, one and the same as the church in Acts. Based on this virtual exegetical equating of the two concepts, it is no logical or theological stretch to conclude that disciple making is, in fact, Jesus’ intended church-building process.

If nothing else, these understandings certainly offer a very strong case that disciple making should have a prominent place in any discussion of Ecclesiology. However, an examination of several prominent, Evangelical systematic theologies in use in various Evangelical institutions currently reveals, however, that this is not the case. Christian theologies typically introduce Ecclesiology by discussing the meaning of the word *ekklēsia* in Scripture and those Hebrew words translated as such in the Septuagint, then move on to examining biblical images of the church, etc. If the relationship between the Matthean Commission methodology is mentioned at all, it is typically not until the discussion of the role of the church and evangelization that disciple making is addressed.¹¹

Based on the preceding discussion, though, disciple making should ideally be added at the very beginning of any full doctrinal discussion of Ecclesiology. After all, since the *ekklēsia* being discussed is Jesus' *ekklēsia*, how can theologians claim to do justice in any sense to that crucial theological topic without paying focused attention to how Jesus specifically intended His church to be built? The clear link between Christ's church, which he says in Matthew 16:18 that he will build, and his climactic command to build disciples in the Great Commission has been firmly established, so any Doctrine of the Church that makes a serious claim to being exegetically rooted¹² must begin with mathetaical ecclesiology.

¹¹ See especially Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013); See also Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999); Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002).

¹² Sadly, though many evangelical systematic theologians claim to agree with the methodological truism that *theology is no stronger than the exegesis that undergirds it*, in practice they simply continue to include and exclude exactly the same doctrinal points that the theologians who came before them included or excluded. In such a "closed system," there is thus little, if any, place for exegesis to exercise its rightful corrective role on the content of doctrine.

Appendix

Ecclesiology: An (Overdue) Introductory Essay on the Need to Utilize Proper Theological Method

Most terminal degree programs in systematic theology include at least a portion of a doctoral seminar on theological method, obviously so that aspiring theology teachers/theologians will be fully aware of the importance of the theological process, not just the product of the theological content they will be presenting. At its simplest, the four-step process set forth by D.A. Carson accurately traces the familiar path of the assembling of systematic theology: From 1) Exegesis to 2) Biblical Theology 3) through consideration of the relevant data of Historical Theology; to 4) Systematic Theology.¹³ Even the more complex nine-step theological method of Millard Erickson begins with exegesis.¹⁴ Thus, it can be safely said: 1) The first step toward systematic theology is exegesis; and 2) Any resulting theological superstructure can be no stronger than the exegetical foundation that undergirds it.

In regard to the Doctrine of the Church (Ecclesiology), a considerable amount of highly relevant exegetical data has not been assimilated into the theologizing process to be properly reflected in the systematic product. Specifically, in the Book of Acts, the plural “disciples” (Gk *mathētai*) is interchangeable with “church” (Gk *ekklēsia*)—as clearly seen in such passages as Acts 5:11 and 6:1; 8:1 and 9:1; 11:26; 14:22-23; 14:27-28; and 20:28, 30).¹⁵ This observation becomes even much more significant when it is realized that this interchangeability offers the clearest explanation of the procedure by which Jesus’ proclamation “I will build My church”

¹³ Carson, “Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology,” in D.A. Carson and J.D. Woodbridge, eds. *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 91.

¹⁴ M.J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* 2nd Edition. L.A. Hustad, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 19-22.

¹⁵ See pp. 4-10 of the preceding paper for the development of this exegetical conclusion.

(Matt 16:18) would be fulfilled: by “*making disciples*” in keeping with the process He laid out in *Matthew 28:19-20*.

What is the problem here? Is it that the exegetical basis for the conclusions stated above are somehow not clear enough or otherwise suspect? The following citations make it abundantly clear that the stated conclusions are not easily open to dispute.

In his entry on “Church” in the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*,¹⁶ I. Howard Marshall concludes his discussion of Matthew 16:18 with these words: “Jesus... called [people] to be his own disciples and to constitute the *ekklēsia* of the Messiah...” In other words, Marshall’s biblical implication from studying the relevant Gospels passages is that “disciples” and “church” are the same people—precisely the point of the above paper.

Then, in the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*,¹⁷ Kevin Giles, focusing only on the relevant terminology used in Acts at this point is his “Church” entry, concludes that “church” and “disciples” are “virtual synonyms that can be used interchangeably.”¹⁸ Again, this is exactly what was argued in the paper that precedes this Postscript.

At this point, it could be wished that the problem here would be diagnosable as some obvious failure in regard to the use of proper theological method. That, however, is not the case. The problem is *non-use* of proper theological methods. For example, in the two examples cited just above, the highly-regarded exegetes/biblical theologians who wrote the entries drew their

¹⁶ J.B. Green, S. McKnight and I.H. Marshall, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 124.

¹⁷ R.P. Martin and P.H. Davids, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997), 197.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* It must be noted that Giles also accurately states that, alongside “disciples” and “church,” believers,” “brethren,” “people,” “Christians” and “saints” are also interchangeable. However, since Giles does not bring Matt 16:18 and 28:19-20 into the discussion, he cannot be expected to exegetically prioritize “church” and “disciples.”

completely legitimate exegetical conclusions but did not push the implications on through to the level of systematic theology. At the other end of the theologizing process, theologians may read entries in reference works like the *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* and the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* and see the clear exegetically-founded conclusions drawn, but not follow through in the utilization of proper theological method to adjust/correct their content in teaching doctrine/theology (i.e., in this case, Ecclesiology) accordingly.

The bottom line here is that, if more than lip service is given to proper theological method, there is easily sufficient exegetical data to require that any theological discussion claiming evenhandedness, much less comprehensiveness, of the origin of the Church that Jesus Christ committed Himself to build (Matt 16:18) *must* start with the “disciples” (Gk *mathetai*) being made according to Christ’s commanded methodology in Mathew 28:19-20. As has been seen clearly by now, methodologically, it is exegetically and theologically indefensible to do otherwise.