

“This Sells Itself”

Dr. D. Jay Losher, Jr.

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Matthew 28:16-20 = sharing the Gospel

Chuck Nelson really believed in his cars. Saturn had just been introduced and Chuck, Saturn salesman extraordinaire, was in the Commissioned Lay Pastors program I directed. Talking with Chuck on a break and knowing how busy and stressful auto sales can be, I asked him how he had time for the Presbytery’s intense commissioning program.



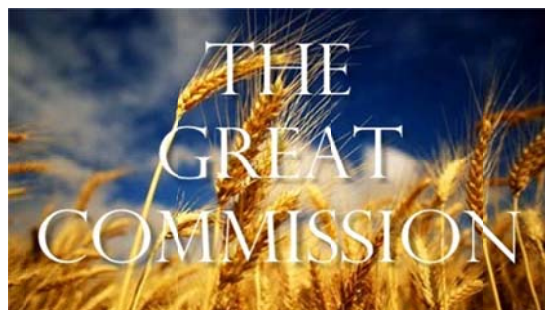
Chuck responded his day job wasn’t that stressful. Selling Saturns is so easy, he says: “these cars sell themselves!!” Chuck Nelson had also proven to be a pretty good theologian as well. He put the same philosophy to work in theology as he did in the car dealership. He said, “we don’t have to sell the Gospel. The Gospel sells itself.”



He’s right. However we must be careful. We should never think of the Gospel as a product for sale, but he is right about one important thing: salesmanship with the Gospel is misplaced. There are indeed some who would push the Gospel as if it were a product complete with advertising campaigns, marketing strategies and

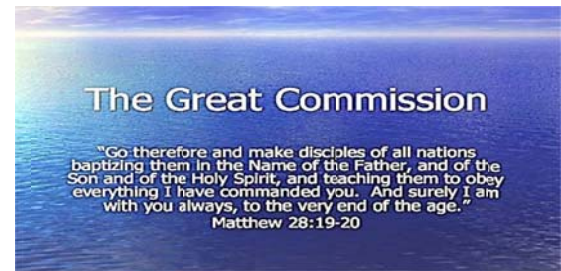
quotas for conversions. These may work as far as pushing a product, but the Gospel is definitely not a product. The Gospel does not need for us to sell it, rather the Gospel needs for us to live it.

Today, we have what is called the Great Commission. Not to be confused with the Great *Commandment*.



It’s the Great *Commission* we hear today. The Great Commission takes place in Matthew at the very end. On the day of his ascension, Jesus’ marching orders to us are:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”



These verses never quite registered with me. Yes, I had heard them read in church and yes, we studied them in Confirmation Class, but I guess Confirmation and Sunday School and even Sunday worship readings sometimes go in one ear and out the other. Its importance was never raised to the level of consciousness.

Jesus' marching orders never registered until I was in Seminary, when a student from an Evangelical background pointed out the "Great Commission." The scales dropped from my eyes. You could have pushed me over with a feather. Jesus really does intend for us to share the Gospel. Jesus really does want us to make disciples ~ not just expand the institution church, but much more to spread God's kingdom. It was an astounding revelation.

Yet one must ask how are we supposed to make disciples? Jesus doesn't give us too much detail here on the "how" question.

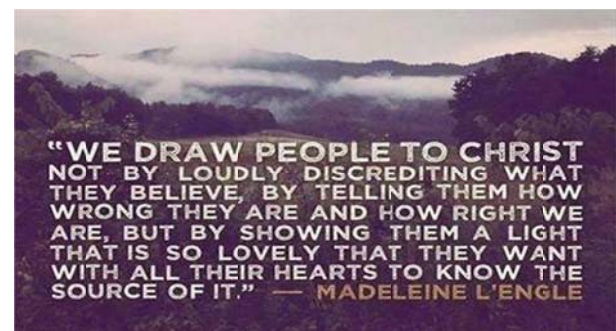


My own discomfort with the idea of this imperative **"make disciples"** stems precisely from the sense of coercion implicit in the word **"make."** Does this mean "manufacture disciples," force conversions? Few today want to go there, but unfortunately in the history of the Church, some have interpreted the word **"make"** this precise way ~ justification to shame, guilt or coerce folks into becoming disciples. After all, it is for their own good.

One important principle in God's realm is that ends and means must match. One cannot use unjust means even for a justified purpose. This goes equally for the "soft sell" as much as the "hard sell." No coercion allowed, no force, no manipulation, no pushing a product allowed.

Madeleine L'Engle says it so clearly:

"We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right



we are, but by showing them a light so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.”

The question remains, how do we “make disciples” in Jesus’ way without gamesmanship, subterfuge or the typical sleazy tricks of the trade? Jesus did give us some idea of how to go about this. It obviously involves “baptizing” and “teaching” ~

How do we make disciples? Francis of Assisi gives us some good guidance. Francis is widely quoted to have said:

PREACH THE GOSPEL AT ALL TIMES
and when necessary use words

“Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”

More explicitly on another occasion Francis said:

“Let [everyone] preach by their deeds.”

That’s the ticket. Francis counsels us to use the carrot not the stick ~ to make our lives transparent to the Gospel. We make disciples not by selling but by showing, not by coercing but by coaxing, not by enticing but inviting. Making disciples Jesus’ way is to live as much as we are able in the kingdom, living out those values so transparently, so attractively, that folks rejoice to enter God’s realm.

The best way, the most effective way for us to encourage individuals to become followers of Jesus is simply to live as much as we are able in the kingdom ourselves. God’s kingdom doesn’t sell itself, rather it naturally attracts those seeking wholeness in life and persons who long for a better world.

My friend Chuck Nelson no longer sells Saturns. GM’s Saturn is gone.

Back in the day when my friend Chuck Nelson was selling Saturns and studying to become a Commissioned Lay Pastor, it was the early days of Saturns. GM created a whole new way of designing, building and marketing automobiles. It was genius. In those first heady days, the cars did fly off the lots. It was like magic.



Then like so many other corporations have done when they accomplish something really big, GM sat on their laurels. Over time they stopped innovating the Saturn division. It was a rational decision, albeit a bad one.

Things were going so well with Saturn, GM thought they had a bird's nest on the ground. So they refocused investment and development elsewhere.

Years passed. The original innovative designs became dated. GM set itself up to fail. When GM did fail and great was the fall of it, Saturn was but a shadow of its former self and GM jettisoned it.



Our life as a disciple of Jesus and our life inviting others to enter the realm of God can follow a similar pattern. It can start out well with great enthusiasm and deep commitment. Over time momentum may stall, inertia set in and in the end, our life in Christ can fall to filling a small part of our life. We are no longer transparent to the

Gospel, no longer living in a way to attract others to enter God's realm.

How do we solve this eternal dilemma. Entropy, the physical principle that everything winds down ~ Entropy is everywhere. Even in our spiritual life. How do we sustain our energy for the joyous work of inviting all humanity into God's kingdom? How do we maintain our momentum?

Jesus ends his final words to us, his Great Commission with:

“remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

His benediction. His final blessing. When we seek to build God's blessed community, Jesus promises he is with us in all our endeavors. When we show a light so lovely that all want with all their hearts to know the source of it, Jesus is with us. When we do everything we can to live in God's realm, Jesus is there among us. When we do it unto the least of these, we do it unto Jesus. When our deeds shout out God's love, Jesus is there in the love we show.



No advertisement necessary!

Prayer:

Loving and Gracious God, you have promised to always be with us ~ through the ages and forever. We pray our lives are transparent to you and your Gospel. May nothing in our lives detract from your kingdom. May nothing in our lives distract others from experiencing your grace. Be with us and work through us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.