

LIFE FOREVER PRESENT

SERIES: HE IS ALIVE! AND HE IS STILL ALIVE!

By Ron Ritchie

A wonderful thing happened as we were planning for our men's retreat last winter. The committee had invited all our men in the mission field to come and enjoy the retreat with us. Shortly after the invitation went out to them, I began to receive some phone calls. Dudley Weiner called me from Paris and said that he was delighted to be asked and that he was planning on coming. After a pause he asked, "Ron, would it be all right to invite my disciple Philip to join me?" Of course the answer was, "Yes, yes!" Shortly after that phone message Ed Woodhall called me with the delightful news that Heime, our Mexican brother who had been the key player in the prison ministry in Columbia and who is now in Mexico City, was coming to the retreat, and he was bringing one of his disciples, Alfredo. Then I received a call from Carl Gallivan who was coming in from Germany, and he wanted to know if he could bring Mirko and Manfred. Mirko, a Croatian ex-priest he was discipling in the word of God, owned a bar in the little German village of Reichelsheim. And Manfred ministered in the Castle, at which many of us have stayed and ministered, just above the village.

That was just of the beginning of scores of stories of disciplers inviting disciples to the men's retreat. This same phenomenon was repeated at the women's retreat. All this happened because these men and women were being obedient to the command of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ: "Make disciples."

Let's review the events leading up to this point before we examine this command of Jesus. On the first Easter morning some women followers of Jesus Christ had gone to his tomb to anoint his body, only to find the stone rolled away, the guards acting like dead men, and two angels waiting by the cave's opening! One of the two angels had said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said...And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead, and behold, He is going before you into Galilee [see Isaiah 9], there you will see Him...." (Matthew 28:5-7.) (Later the chief priests and the elders paid the failed guards some hush money and conspired to circulate the lie that the disciples had come by night and stolen the body of Jesus [see Matthew 28:11-15].)

According to a harmony of the Gospels our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ then appeared eleven times over a period of forty days before he ascended to the Father in heaven. On the first Sunday in Jerusalem he (1) met with Mary Magdalene (see John 20:11-18), (2) then with all the other women who had first gone to the tomb (see Matthew 28:9-10), (3) with two followers on the road to Emmaus (see Luke 24:13-32), (4) and then with Peter (see 1 Corinthians 15:5). Finally on that evening he (5) met with all the disciples except Thomas and then (6) some eight days later with all of them including Thomas (see John 20:19-31). Then in Galilee Jesus (7) met with seven of his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Tiberias (see John 21:1-25), and then (8) with the eleven disciples on a mountain (Matthew 28:19-20). Some biblical scholars think that Jesus also met the "over" five hundred brothers mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:6 at this same time. He then (9) appeared to James (see 1 Corinthians 15:7) and then went back to Jerusalem where he (10) appeared to all the disciples (see Luke 24:36-49; Acts 1:3-8). And finally on the Mount of Olives by Bethany he (11) blessed his disciples and then ascended into heaven, with the angels promising the disciples that he would return in like manner (see Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9-12).

It was on the eighth time Jesus appeared that he gave them their commission: "Make disciples." But first he told them....

All authority has been given to me!

Matthew 28:16-18

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And 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."

On this third time that Jesus met his disciples as a group, some of them were still a little shaky. Notice that they obeyed him, then worshiped Him, and then some doubted him. Their faith in him was growing each day, but when some of them saw him, they were uncertain about who he was and how he was going to establish his kingdom on earth. Only two weeks earlier they had walked with thousands of cheering men, women, and children hailing him as their Messiah, and now here they were---eleven men on the Pharisees' most wanted list, alone on a mountain with their risen Lord whom they had seen crucified, and no army behind him. But the first words he said to them diminished their doubts and fears: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the all-present, all-knowing, and all-powerful one, God Himself, became flesh and voluntarily became restricted in presence, knowledge, and power. As the apostle Paul would later write, "...Although [He] existed in the form of God, [he] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8.)

At Jesus' trial the high priest Caiaphas said to him, "I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God." And Jesus said to him, "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." (Matthew 26:63-64.) Then he went to the cross to pay the price of his life and blood for our sins and our redemption. After his resurrection and ascension, Paul continues in Philippians 2:9, "Therefore also God highly exalted Him...." and placed him back into the position he had held before he arrived on earth in Bethlehem. And so "at the name of Jesus every knee [shall] bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and...every tongue [shall] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). A thousand years earlier David had prophesied in Psalm 110:1,

"The LORD says to my Lord:
'Sit at My right hand,
Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.'"

And five hundred years earlier Daniel had spoken of Jesus and his resurrection (7:13-14):

"I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.

And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations, and men of every language
Might serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed."

Jesus had always had authority, or the freedom to act with absolute and unrestricted right and power over all creation and creatures. He submitted to restriction in his humanity, but now as our risen Lord in the age of the Spirit he has the power to begin his church, the body of which he will be the head, which "the gates of Hades shall not overpower." It is through his church that he will now offer the gift of salvation and eternal life to all

whom God the Father has given to him, Jew and Gentile alike (see John 17:2). Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:22 that because of our Lord's resurrection, all who are in Christ shall be made alive. Then at the end when his work on earth is finished, he will deliver up the kingdom to God the Father "after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." (1 Corinthians 15:24-28.)

Our Lord was not asking these disciples to move out into the fallen, demon-infested, and politically and socially corrupt world in their own strength and power. Rather, all authority had been released to him by his Father, and he was going to make sure that it was his power working in and through them that would enable them to carry out his commandments in building his church as they moved out into their communities and eventually to the ends of the known world.

This power and authority would first be seen when Peter stood up on the day of Pentecost, and filled with the Holy Spirit, he preached to them about the resurrected Jesus who was still their Messiah. Some three thousand men repented and became Christians. Later Peter and John were hauled before the Jewish supreme court and asked, "By what power, or in what name, have you done this [healed the former lame man]?" "Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead---by this name this man stands here before you in good health. He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the very corner stone. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:8-12.) The power and authority of our risen Lord Jesus was given to his disciples so the church could grow and become salt and light in a fallen world.

And because all authority in heaven and earth has been returned to our risen Lord and Savior, we as his disciples can now have the confidence and power to move out in obedience to his commands, just as the original disciples did.

In your going

Matthew 28:19

"Go therefore..."

Jesus said, "Go therefore...." This could also be translated, "In your going...." or "Having gone...." He was saying, "Go, because as your Lord I have promised to impart the person and power of the Holy Spirit to strengthen and guide you in your mission. [See John 16:7-15.] And go because I told you all in Caesarea Philippi, 'I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it.' Now, my church will *not* be a renewed Israel or a spiritual Israel, but it will be made up of men and women (both Jew and Gentile) out of every nation, tribe, and race who respond to your presentation of the good news that I am the Messiah, the son of the living God. And if they place their faith in me, they will be delivered out of the domain of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light [see Colossians 1:13], and they will be given the gift of eternal life. This plan will begin on the day of Pentecost, and it will continue until I come again at the end of the age of the Spirit."

Jesus was speaking of taking his gospel to the world, but it would all begin in Jerusalem, then move beyond the walls of the Holy City, then go up into the hills of Judea and Samaria, and finally travel to the Gentiles around the known world. He used the apostles to set the model for each generation. Each one of us is given different communities, different work-places, different countries, different societies, different families, and different spiritual gifts. But regardless of all those differences, our risen Lord wants us as his disciples to move out into the world---some right where we are, and some to different countries, either for a period of time

or for the rest of our lives. We allow our hearts to be motivated by our risen Lord Jesus to move out daily with the messages, "Jesus is the Son of the living God," and "there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved." We are called to be ministers of reconciliation with the message "...that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entreating through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:19-20).

At our January men's retreat we were privileged to not only invite our twelve men home from their various mission fields, but we also had the joy of hearing how our risen and present Lord was using them and their families to minister in many foreign countries. In addition, during our Sunday morning "body life" time a young man stood up and introduced to us a man he had led to the Lord Jesus the night before, our new brother in Christ---and also his father. The key to each situation was that by the power of our risen Lord Jesus these men moved out in obedience to him where he had placed them with the message of reconciliation.

Jesus is not only the source of our power in our going, but he is also the source of our focus....

Make disciples

Matthew 28:19-20

"...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...."

Make is the main verb in this sentence. It is a command not a suggestion, this is an order from the King of kings to his disciples! All of us who have accepted him as our Lord are now called on to make disciples. Once a Jew or Gentile gave their heart to Jesus, then they were to give him their minds and will as well, and willingly become a pupil or a learner, one who was willing to come under the discipline of the teacher, Christ Jesus himself. And Jesus was not asking these men to do something he hadn't done himself. Isaiah, speaking of the coming Messiah's being discipled by his Father, said in 50:4-7,

"The Lord GOD has given Me the tongue of disciples,
That I may know how to sustain the weary one with a word.

He awakens Me morning by morning,
He awakens My ear to listen as a disciple.
The Lord GOD has opened My ear;
And I was not disobedient."

He was obedient all the way to the cross.

So when Jesus took on humanity and then walked the shores of the sea of Galilee at the beginning of his earthly ministry, he understood discipleship clearly when he said to Peter and his brother Andrew who were casting nets into the sea, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (Mark 1:17). Thus began the process of their being discipled: First came the relationship with Jesus, with the understanding that they were to put him above their own selfish motives, hopes, and dreams, and even above their families. Then they were to take up their cross daily to follow him, and be willing to give up all their possessions (see Luke 14:26-33). The goal of discipleship was very well expressed by the apostle Paul to the Colossian believers: "...that we may present every man complete [mature] in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). The objective of discipling is to bring men and women to a place where they are no longer depending on themselves, their friends, family, or possessions, or their discipler; but their total dependence is in Christ each and every day. They understand that Jesus Christ is their life, their power, and their resource; and they are independently dependent upon the Lord Jesus Christ to enable them to function as a disciple by his Spirit and his word.

"...Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit...." Paul would write to the Romans, "...Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized [placed] into Christ Jesus have been

baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Romans 6:3-4.) Now, this spiritual baptism of being placed into the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:13) would be symbolized by each new believer when with this spiritual knowledge they submitted to water baptism. Water baptism is a public physical shadow of an inward spiritual reality. Being baptized or placed into water demonstrates outwardly our spiritual identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the new life we have in him, which began at the moment of salvation.

The new believers are to be baptized in the name (not names) of the one triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are to publicly acknowledge that God is their heavenly Father, that they have repented of their former view of Jesus and their sins against him and now acknowledge that he is their Lord and Savior, and that the Holy Spirit is the one who indwells, seals, empowers, and teaches them in their new life in Christ.

This verse leaves no room for infant baptism, for all who come into a relationship with Jesus Christ come with the full knowledge of what they are doing. The new believers at Pentecost were baptized immediately. So were the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius and his household, Lydia, the jailer in Philippi, etc., etc. And there is no biblical restriction as to who should do the baptizing; any baptized Christian can baptize any new Christian. Neither is there any restriction as to where one should be baptized---rivers, lakes, oceans, bath tubs, hot tubs, or swimming pools. What matters is that baptism is an act of obedience to the Lord on the part of the new believer as well as a public demonstration to their family, friends, fellow Christians, and community of the importance of their new relationship with Jesus Christ.

"...Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...." Teaching is the Greek verb *didasko*, to give instruction. The experience in the Upper Room was very important in Jesus' preparation of his disciples for his departure and their future ministry. First he told his disciples, "...I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told me." (John 12:49-50.) Now, he knew that they knew that all the Law was summarized in this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27.) He had also taught them that they could not keep those commandments unless they understood clearly, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5.)

But then in the Upper Room Jesus also gave them a new commandment that he repeated three times: (1) "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35.) (2) "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you." (John 15:12.) And then he explained the type of love he had in mind: self-sacrificing *agape* love- servant love. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13.) (3) "This I command you, that you love one another." (John 15:17.) Once our relationships with God and his Son and between ourselves and our spiritual brothers and sisters are in place by his power, then all his other teachings fall in line, to his glory and our joy. And the world is attracted to Jesus as a result.

The other night I was sitting at our elders meeting, and I became aware that all our elders, including myself, had been discipled by other loving and faithful men, some of whom have now joined the Lord and some of whom are still among us. I also realized that all those men were in turn discipling other men among us. Then I began to think about our staff of men and women, and I was delighted to realize that they too had been discipled and now were presently in the process of lovingly discipling many men and women among us, of whom many are now themselves in positions of spiritual leadership. "Make disciples" has been a foundation stone among the elders, staff, and people since our beginnings. The principle is seen clearly in the words of Paul, who was about to be killed for Christ's sake, when he wrote to his disciple Timothy: "You therefore my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." (2 Timothy 2:1-2.)

Our commission from our risen Lord, because of his authority, empowers us to move out into our

communities with the good news of Jesus Christ. As we have the privilege to introduce men, women, boys, and girls to Jesus Christ, we are then called upon to "make disciples" of them, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and then teaching them to observe our Lord's new commandment. We are to continue until we can present everyone mature in Christ, so that they can begin the same discipling process themselves by the power of the Holy Spirit. The early church understood this, and they walked in obedience to our Lord's command. In the book of Acts you will find many stories of the early disciples in Jerusalem and then in Samaria, Joppa, Damascus, Antioch, Asia, Greece, Rome, Ephesus, and Caesarea, to mention but a few of the many cities in which believers were discipled by the apostles and other mature believers.

Their courage in the midst of pressures from the world, the flesh, and the devil was built on the firm foundation of a promise from our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ....

The promise

Matthew 28:20

"...And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Lo means surely, remember, take note, or pay close attention! No one less than the great "I AM" is with you always, moment by moment, day in and day out, week in and week out, month in and month out, year after year, until the end of the age. Jesus was saying, "I am alive and present, whether invisible or visible, in your joys, trials, suffering, confusion, and difficulties; and I will never leave you or forsake you. Therefore, fear not. I am going to send you out to Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit arrives. And I am going to send you to the Jewish communities of Judea surrounding the Holy City. And then I am going to send you to the hated half-breeds living in Samaria. And then I am going to send you to all the nations around the known world and eventually even the unknown world, where men and women and boys and girls are being held captive by spiritual forces, demonic cultures, vain philosophies, and the world system, not to mention their own "lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life" (1 John 2:16). And no matter where I send you, when I send you, or in what generation I send you, even if you cannot see me, look with the eyes of faith and truly believe that I am with you always until my redemptive work on this earth is done---even unto the end of the age of the Spirit."

The key to our Lord's commission is, "I am with you right now!" God promised to send a Savior through Isaiah the prophet, and seven hundred years later he told Joseph the husband of Mary that the baby in her womb was that Savior. He said, "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, God with us." (Matthew 1:22.) Alcoholics Anonymous has a great quote: "If God seems far away, who moved?" These eleven humble fishermen and blue-collar workers were sent out to carry out the greatest task in the world, but with them always was the greatest presence in the world, our risen Lord Jesus.

Jesus is still with us each and every moment. And he wants to not only live within us but to express his love through us to each other and then to the hurting world all around us, so they too can come into a personal relationship with him and be given the gift of eternal life and the person and power of the Holy Spirit. And then we are called upon by our risen Lord and his power to take those new believers and "make disciples" so that they will become spiritually mature and be equipped to pass this eternal truth on to the next generation, until the end of the age. Jesus is not only with us in this calling, but he is the one who will empower us to begin the process of walking in obedience to this major command.

Where are you at this moment in your Christian life? I hope it is the same place that so many around you are in: one of obedience to our risen Lord in carrying out his great commission with the full knowledge that Life is forever present! and that Life is our risen Lord Jesus.

Ron Ritchie
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