

## LAST WORD ON WHAT'S IMPORTANT

By Rich Carlson

I'm sure that some of you graduates that are graduating from high school probably think that I don't remember my graduation from high school at all. But you're wrong. I remember it quite well. I'm actually wearing the watch that I go for a gift. It was June, 1958, Willow Glen High School on the football field. It was late afternoon, and it was a big day. I remember the sun coming right over the bleachers and coming into the eyes of all of us that were sitting up on the platform. I was graduating and was chosen to make one of the speeches. As that late after noon sun came right over the top of the bleachers and right into my eyes I couldn't see the audience. That was fine for me because I was pretty nervous. On the other hand I was also a bit too proud. I had received an appointment to West Point that had been announced and I thought I was pretty big stuff. In fact, you graduates need to remember one of Carlson's corollaries: At 18 you are as smart as you are ever going to get. So enjoy it. The season will soon change.

There were a couple of things that happened to me that changed things right away also. On the last day of June I had to fly to New York City, take a taxi to a hotel, stay overnight. The next day I had to take a bus from the Port Authority Bus Terminal up to West Point and check in. I had never flown before. I was to leave at 1:00 in the afternoon, and I told my dad, "Gee, I'd really like to take my girlfriend to San Francisco before I left."

And he said, "Fine, but Rich, be on time because the flight's at 1:00." The problem was that I had never flown before, and I didn't really know what being on time meant. So, as my dad requested, I showed up 20 minutes early. Well you can imagine how mad my father was. I didn't know there was going to be 50 people there to see me off. I didn't know you're suppose to be there an hour before the flight. So he rushed to get my bags checked in, and I rushed to reach the boarding call. As I walked up there, he took me by the shoulders, looked me right in the eyes , and gave me his last words of instruction, "Rich, do me proud. And if you flunk out, don't come home."

Well, the next afternoon I found myself standing in a line in front of the First Sergeant of Sixth New Cadet Company. I'd lost most of my hair. I had this foreign new uniform on, and I was trying to report: "Sir, Cadet Carlson reports to the Sixth Company First Sergeant for the first time as ordered, sir!" And it took me about six times to get it right. That afternoon there was a song that I heard. It was coming from one of the rooms of the upperclassmen. In the college I went to, underclassmen didn't get radios. It was a song and I remember its title very well: "You Were A Big Man Yesterday, But Boy You Ought To See You Now!" So for the next four years my dad's last words rang in my ears: "Do me proud, but if you flunk, don't come home."

Today, whether you are a graduate or whether you're a dad, we all need to be reminded of the Lord's last words of instruction to us. We have those last words, those last words that are very important. So, turn with me to Matthew, chapter 28 verses 16 to 20.

James Montgomery Boyce in his preface to his book *Here We Stand* says this.

So what is wrong with evangelicals. The answer is that we have become worldly. We have abandoned the truths of the Bible and the historic theology of the church which expresses those truths, and we are trying to do the work of God by means of the world's theology, the world's methods, agenda instead.

Why are we trying to use the world's method? Well, it seems to me that these world's methods bring some

promise. They say they are efficient and fast. I think in the church, wanting to do things right, wanting to get things done, we're tempted to follow their advice. Second, I think when the pressure's on we tend to panic. We see the population growing. We see the people around us not very influenced by the church. We're feeling we're lacking any impact and therefore we want to try anything that works. And so we try our own programs, our own techniques, and our own methods. We give them our own authority and we take things into our own hands. But what is the last word on what's important?

We're going to look right now at the last words that Jesus gave: good in the first century and, I believe, very pertinent to us as we enter the 21st century. Let's look at the setting in verses 16 and 17.

**But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some were doubtful.**

Who was present on the mountain? Well, it was the disciples. How many were there? Eleven. At the last moment, just before Jesus ascends to the Father, He chose to give His men a few last words. These were the men that he had chosen to carry on the work of the Father which had been given to him. And there were 11. Can't you just imagine the scene in heaven when the Lord gets back to heaven and he checks in and the angles say, "How did it go?"

And he says, "Ah, great!"

"Well, how many do you have?"

"Eleven."

"Eleven thousand?"

"No."

"Eleven hundred?"

"No. Eleven."

"Wait a minute. Thirty-three years and eleven?"

"Eleven."

Where were they meeting? Well, we're not quite sure, but in verse seven of the same chapter the angel said that he was going before them into Galilee and there they would see him. "Behold, I have told you." So they in obedience were at the designated mountain in Galilee.

Look at the text now, and when they saw him what did they do? Well, some worshipped and some doubted. Why the difference? I really believe that some saw who he was and what he had done and therefore what he could do. And they bent their knee and their hearts, acknowledged his lordship and presented themselves to him as available. That's worship. Others lost focus on him. They started looking around, saw only a few frightened men, remembered what he expected them to do and said to themselves, "How can we do this?" and they were doubtful; completely unconvinced that they could do what he expected. Of course, in reality they couldn't. The question was: Were they available to allow him to do through them what he required and only they could do?

So what do we discover? What do we observe? What is the principle we can see from this first section? First of all, his method was man, and that he focused on a few.

Let me read now the directions that he gives us in verse 18.

**And Jesus came up and spoke to them saying, "All authority has been given to me in**

**heaven and on earth."**

Now what do shaky, doubtful disciples need? They need the authority of the person they are following. Notice the authority that is available. He says, "All authority ... in heaven and on earth." It seems to me that "in heaven and on earth" are both inclusive and exclusive. The possessor of this authority is Jesus. It was given to him by his Father, and there is no place in which it is not supreme. Therefore, there is no power in any place that is any greater. That is who they are following. This is the authority in which he speaks to us, and the authority from which he gives us these instructions; because he has the authority from his Father, the Creator, who is the personal covenant keeping God, our God. And we need to be listening.

I'd like us to turn, for a moment, to John chapter 12 and look at a few verses that show us how Jesus operated; because this was a particular type of authority demonstrated in a particular way. John, chapter 12, verses 49 and 50. Jesus is speaking. He says,

For 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 chapter five, verses 19 and 20 also gives us an insight.

**Jesus, therefore, answered and was saying to them, "Truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself unless it is something he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he himself is doing; and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel.**

Then in verse 30 he says this. Now this is Jesus, our Lord, speaking. He says,

**I can do nothing on my own initiative; as I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of him who sent me.**

So Jesus, our Messiah, the Anointed One, received his words from the mouth of God, and spoke with the unique authority of the Son who alone knows perfectly the Father, and who alone can adequately and accurately reveal him. So if these are words that also are to us, if we've chosen to make Jesus Lord, and therefore we are his follower and therefore a disciple of his, notice how we are to act. The principle is that he modeled a delegated power. He wasn't acting on his own, he was acting exactly as his Father wanted him to act. He didn't even say any words unless the Father gave them to him. He came to make manifest another person's life in his own. He had confidence, and direction, and purpose because he relied on the authority of his Father. He did not say or do anything unless he knew the Father approved. Therefore, we see him spending time, checking in with the Father. Isn't that the life that he calls us to also? Making manifest another person's life in our own? So he modeled a delegated power.

You see, we do not have to invent a method or a strategy. We don't have to panic. We must merely follow his example. The life Jesus modeled is exactly what we're called to do. The Father through the obedience of the Son gives life to us through the Spirit. He wants us to get to know him, his words, his character, his wisdom, and to understand all he can do. And he takes that new creation in us and clothes it with our humanity, and then walks us around and gives people permission to look at us.

So how are we to go about looking at this? What are to do? Look in verse 19.

**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

Now it's important for us to realize what the command is in the text, because when we read it, even in the New American Standard version, it is not quite clear. In the original language, the command is to "make disciples." That command is clarified by three participles: (1) going, (2) baptizing, and (3) teaching. The participle "go" could be better translated as, "as you go" or "in the going." In other words, in the natural course of life during

its normal activity we are to make disciples. Did you notice that characteristic of Jesus' life? As he went he included his disciples in his normal activity. So he disciplined as a lifestyle.

So this is the principle we need to grasp and this is the command that we need to obey. He says, "Make disciples of all the nations." That is his call to us. If you are a business man or maybe an engineer, you could say the work product of the church is to make disciples anywhere, everywhere. That is what we are to produce individually and collectively. If we are not spending our time with people focusing on a few to bring them closer to the Shepherd, equipping them to follow him, then I think we're just spending time.

What is a disciple? That word means a pupil or a learner. In the singular it appears 27 times in the New Testament. Let me just quickly read to you a few verses that help us get a handle on what Jesus' picture is of a disciple. In Luke 14:26 he says,

**If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.**

Jesus expected a disciple to be a follower; someone that put him first, obviously had made him Lord. In John 8:31 he says, "If you abide in my word then you are truly my disciples." So he expects a disciple to be looking in, getting his sustenance daily from his word. In John 13:35 he says, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for the other." And then he gives the world permission to decide whether he's come in the flesh or not by whether we love one another. In John 15:8 he says, "By this is my Father glorified that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." So as his disciple we're expected to glorify him, to be growing up, to be developing the fruit of his character and having a growth that reproduces. In Luke 6:40 the word disciple is not used, but the word is pupil. "A pupil is not above his teacher but everyone after he has been fully trained will be like his teacher." That's the goal of the process, to be like him, so when someone looks at us they'll see him.

Now if, like the apostles, we are to be followers of Jesus and we are trying to follow his command, what is to be our main activity? If the command is to make disciples, and going, baptizing and teaching are the participles, then those are to be the major activities.

So as we go it says to baptize. Now I think that water baptism is in view here. Yet the word "baptizo" was used of putting a cloth into a vat of dye. So I think the meaning of the word really has two aspects to it. It has the aspect of being placed into something, and it has the aspect of being identified with something. Because as the cloth was put into a red dye, there was the picture of putting in, but secondly, as I pull the cloth out it is now red. It is permanently changed. It would now be known as a red cloth.

So I think one of our major activities should be identifying people. It says to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are to help people understand that water baptism is merely a picture of what has happened in the Spirit: The Spirit, we are told, places us into the body of Christ so we are identified with each other. Secondly, we are now permanently identified with him; with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; with the triune God and what he has done for us and wants to do in us. Chosen by the Father. Redeemed, forgiven by the Son. Sealed by the Spirit -- all of the blessings that we are to have, to appropriate, to spend a lifetime unwrapping, seeing what God has done. So we have a new identity, and we have a new family. So we are to spend our time as disciples unfolding, understanding, and appropriating all that has been done for us; grasping everything that we now are in Christ. I just love that little phrase, "in Christ." If you ever want to do a study of just two words, do a study of that. That little phrase happens 164 times, mostly in the Pauline epistles, and it shows us who we are in Christ.

Notice in 20a that he says, "teaching them to observe all that I command you." The next activity is teaching. Teaching who? Those from all the nations who want to be disciples. Teaching them what? "All that I have commanded them." We need to be teaching the whole counsel of God. That involves knowledge, skill, training, and practice. If we are going to know him through his word and make disciples by sharing with others his word, we've got to know his word, how to feed ourselves, and how to feed others the word of God. If we are to grow we need the continuing sustenance of the bread of life. We find his words and his life in the Scripture. You know, as long as I cannot feed myself, I will never grow up. And if I do not know how to feed

myself I will never be able to pass that skill along to someone else. And if I don't pass it on to others, I am not discipling. And if I am not discipling, I am being disobedient, and that is sin. That is where we are not healthy, growing like we should be. That is why we are anemic. It is interesting to me that we are so conscious of physical diet, and yet so unconscious when it comes to spiritual nourishment. I think at many times we think we can live on a spiritual fast food diet. We get a quick, microwave-oven 45 minutes on Sunday morning. Then we pop a few diet pills of Christian radio during the week, and wonder why we don't grow and why life is not very exciting. If the command is to make disciples, the principle is that my time will be spent identifying people with Jesus and teaching them. Those will be my major activities

In verse 20 Jesus finishes up. Notice he comes full circle.

**...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.**

In verse 20 he ends where he started: with himself. What does he say? This person, Jesus the Lord, with all the authority... Where is he? With you. When? Always. Even to the end of the age. The wonderful principle that he modeled for us is that he remained faithful to those disciples, and will remain faithful. That is what I think he requires of us: That we pick out a few men and women, focus on them, identify them with Jesus, teach them and be faithful to them. He wants us to do the same. He remains faithful to us. Why? For the same reason: He's in us, we're in him. Without him we cannot do anything. But he is in us and he has the right to act, and he is the only one that can act. He is the only one who can create a new disciple, can motivate a faithful disciple, can work through an available disciple, can teach a teachable disciple. Did you catch those adjectives? Faithful, available, teachable. So look for "FAT" people: Faithful, available, teachable. And he, with that kind of authority is with us, even to the end of the age.

You might ask, "Carlson, why are you so stirred up?" As I reflect on this passage at times I think it ought to be named The Great Omission, instead of The Great Commission. Because as I have traveled around and looked around, I am amazed how few pastors, few teachers, few missionaries, few Christians are making disciples. Why is this? First of all I think we want fast solutions. But you see we can only disciple a few at a time, because it takes relationship and it takes time. And it does not lend itself very well to quantification. It's not efficient, but it's the only thing that is effective. At times we would rather be fast and say we're efficient. Also, discipleship is hard work, and additionally we can't predict the results. Have you noticed that people grow and respond to truth at their own pace? We do and so do they. And we don't know how long it will take. Next discipleship is based on long term relationships, deep relationships. And although we are starved for them we are taking less and less time to nurture such relationships. Also I've noticed that we are even afraid to say that we have a discipleship group. You see, that's kind of a technical term, a religious term, so we'll call it "mentoring" or something else.

Now when you graduates go off and step from high school into your first Calculus class, you're going to be immediately confronted with some new terms. You're going to have to talk about sequences, series, limits, re? sums, differentiation, and integration. They expect you to learn these things. As your professor there is writing with his right hand and erasing with his left to conserve board space, and you're desperately trying to take notes, do you think you can raise your hand and say, "Pardon me, sir, would you define all these terms you're using?" No! The name of the game is he expects you to learn the terms. I think it's the same with us. We've got to learn the terms. When we're new in Jesus there are a few terms that go along with things, right? Sin, faith, righteousness, justification, sanctification, discipleship. They are all some of the terms we need to learn at the beginning of the course. We have the responsibility to teach them because the inspired text we have from the teacher uses them. And do you know what, graduates? No matter what level you're at you're pretty sophisticated, because when you get that new book, what do you do? You start underlining it, highlighting it. As you study the Calculus book, you think, " Well, first , let me see, I guess I believe this is true." Then there's a proof that it's correct. Then you learn its arguments and why its true. And you underline the postulates and the theorems and you memorize them. Why? Because they are going to be necessary to learn the concepts and to pass the test. Well you learn the Bible in the same way. So get out your highlighter, your pen, and your ruler, and start underlining and get with it. That's how it goes.

I also realized that I have an expansive view of discipleship. Why? At times I think we have forgotten our role

in making disciples. First of all, we don't make disciples. Jesus makes disciples through us, and we're to follow his model. We are not the shepherd. He's the Shepherd. We are under shepherds, each uniquely gifted to do our part, yes. But we're much more like sheep dogs. What does a sheep dog do? Just barks. Why? So the sheep will look at the Shepherd and learn to hear his voice and follow his command and do what he says. The sheep don't follow the sheep dog around. Have you noticed that? It's the sheep dog that is scrambling all around. So we are sheep dogs, barking at people so they will know his voice, follow his command.

Now also I think we are afraid of this word because we think it is some hierarchical arrangement where one person is telling the other person what to do. That's not correct. We are all in submission to the Lord Jesus and his authority. I think at times we are so afraid of impinging on someone else's rights that we forget how life works. I'm sure that many of you on Friday night were watching the Chicago Bulls and the Utah Jazz go to it. Now can you imagine a recent high school graduate walking up to Michael Jordan in the middle of the floor and saying, "Pardon me, Michael, I've got a better idea." That's funny. We laugh at that. On the other hand, we would be wonderfully encouraged to see Michael go over to a young graduate and say, "Let me tell you how it works." Why? Why doesn't it work the first way? Well, that's a novice talking to a veteran. The veteran knows how to function under pressure. He knows how to do it when time is running out. He knows how to play the game. Well, that's how discipleship works, right? All of us are getting to know Jesus. We are in very different places. Some of us are just getting introduced. You may not have even made him Lord, yet, though you're considering it. Some of you are new babes in Christ. Some of you are enjoying milk. Some of you are starting to eat meat. Some of you are learning to feed yourselves. Some are starting to feed others. Some are learning to sit, others to walk, some to stand, and others how to rest.

Now, my understanding of discipleship is this. In this season, find another person who is a little bit farther along than you are. Then find somebody -- pray about this -- find somebody that is not quite as far along as you are. Then go to the first person and find out how to help the second. You see, we don't disciple for a lifetime like Jesus did. We only come along for a short season of time.

When I was at West Point teaching math, my wife and I worked with a group of some 40 cadets. We didn't know much about what we were doing, but we were starting, just starting. We met with them once a week for Bible study, answered their questions if we could, had them over and fed them more spaghetti than we could ever keep track of, and talked to them. One of those guys' name was Rob. He came to the study, but he was very, very quiet -- rarely said a thing. When he was a senior he married his high school sweetheart. I think she was only 18. He got commissioned and went to join the army as a Second Lieutenant. Then I started hearing about Rob. I found out that he started teaching a Bible study on his very first assignment in Airborne School. Do you know what he was teaching? What I taught him, the same book. And everywhere he went he was the same. He just kept going. He has three children now. He's retired from the Army. He works full time for a mission organization who help train leaders to work with kids overseas with military families. You see, I was not there for very long. I only came in for a very short season to add a little bit. It was Jesus that was discipling him all along.

If you noticed during these three weeks that I'm teaching, encouraging us to look out. Last week we looked on a perspective on success. This week we're looking at the command to make disciples. Next week we're going to be talking about how to reach out to our neighbors -- something the Billy Graham Organization is calling Operation Andrew. I believe we have a unique opportunity as a church, as the body of Christ, this fall to participate in the Billy Graham Crusade. I think it may be a once in a lifetime opportunity for us. I would like the ushers to come forward now, and as we've announced for about a month, we'd like to take a special offering to help financially support in this area. I would like you to give liberally and with great joy. These funds will be used as they look at the different venues in three different cities and all the cost involved. But the real secret of the crusade is when we befriend people, reach out to them and invite them to come along with us. Most people that make a personal commitment during a crusade are ones that have been befriended and brought by someone else. So this week I want us to understand the command and the model that Jesus gave to all of us. He takes us by the shoulder, looks straight into our eyes and gives us his last words on earth: Make disciples. Focus on a few men and women. As a lifestyle, model my life in your life. Make passing on the words I have given to you your major activity. Remain faithful. Remember I am faithful to do it, for I am in you and you are in me, and I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Let us pray.

Father we thank you so much that you are our Father. Lord, thank you so much that you sent your Son and he is the perfect model that we need for life. Lord, he didn't do, speak, or decide anything without checking in with you. He passed that model on to us and you ask us, Lord, through your Son to pass it on to others. Lord, we pray that we would be responsive and obedient, that we would fall in love with you, your word, and with the people around us who need you. Now, Lord, we pray that we would present ourselves to you as available, and that we would now in our first act of worship, give to a special opportunity that we have, not forgetting the next step of inviting others to join us in the crusade. Lord, I really have a burden that we would understand the golden opportunity we have in our community at our work, in our home, to tell others about you and make disciples. We thank you, in Jesus' name. Amen.

---

Catalog No. 8150  
Matthew 28:16-20  
Single Message  
Rich Carlson  
June 15, 1997

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1995 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.