

Articles and Sermons :: Kingdom Initiation Rites - hayford

Kingdom Initiation Rites - hayford - posted by JoeA (), on: 2006/11/23 2:06

Kingdom Initiation Rites by Jack Hayford

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen." (Matthew 28:16-20)

This is a paper intended to focus how, in His Great Commission, Jesus not only sent us to the nations, but how He mandated the initiation and preparation of those who would fulfill His intended mission. His plan was to assure His people would be capacitated to penetrate an unbelieving, blinded and lost, paganized world. Just as He had ministered with truth, power and signs following, and in the same way those He trained had done, His commission directs us to those basics of teaching and training (i.e., discipling) those who would penetrate their world from generation to generation.

We want to invite a closer look at the text of Matthew 28:16-20--a passage so familiar it is usually simply quoted but seldom studied. This study seeks to underscore something of the depth of Jesus' intent in what is generally regarded as His "baptismal formula"--"in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Without belaboring the simplicity of the commission, we seek to underscore its richness of content, hoping to fortify the resolve of pastors and other church leaders to "make disciples" to the full dimension of discipleship that Jesus was outlining in these words. We are compelled by these facts:

The deepening spiritual bondage and paganizing influences invading even most advanced societies makes it increasingly essential that believers become qualified to minister in the full capacities of the early Church--with gifts of power that give evidence of the glory of the Living Christ.

The massive evidence is that today's ministry of evangelism is advancing most rapidly where leaders and their flocks are discipled and equipped to minister "not with persuasive words of human wisdom" (including learned techniques and westernized methodologies), but "in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Corinthians 2:4).

Though such "supernatural ministry" is sometimes discouraged, mocked or trivialized, there is still a host of pastors and leaders who wisely and capably pursue this path of spiritual effectiveness, or who hunger to know how. These recognize the difference between the ministries Jesus gave and the contrasting or distracting instances of unbiblical insensitivity or fanatical exaggeration sometimes seen. There are also many who would more boldly seek to move in the realm of NT's spiritual gifts dynamics if they were assisted to understanding and discipled by trustworthy leadership.

There is an added challenge facing today's Church in the western world, where even apparently healthy congregations garner "decisions for Christ," but where "commitment to Christ" has become a reduced value. Honesty with the stark reality noted by experienced church leaders admits the decline in the number of disciples; being shaped. Convenience-oriented lifestyles seen as sought or demanded by our culture, are resulting in broad ignorance of God's Word and that consequent spiritual shallowness that will be (is) unprepared for cultural deception, for persecution or for Christ's return.

It is clear that a refocusing on discipling as Jesus (and His apostles) discipled early believers is essential to the church truly being "His Church".

Is there a "style" to discipling for ministry as Jesus commissioned?

No, but there is a "Spirit"!

How may we initiate Christ's program by His Spirit?

It is not our belief that "power ministry", or discipling believers unto a fullness of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, requires a stylized approach. The notion that a stereotypical kind of persona, platform approach, order of church service or other technique is necessary is unfounded. In fact, the idea is contrary to the evident pleasure God seems to take in working uniquely and creatively through the distinctive traits of each of His Son's redeemed as they open to His Holy Spirit. But the necessity of "opening to the Holy Spirit" and the priority of passion, prayer and availability to His visitation is not negotiable--it is a divine constant. We may fashion sincere substitutes for the elements Jesus indicates in His commission, but we miss His announced intention if we end with only "believers" and not "disciples".

The Great Commission cannot be regarded as a theological nicety: it requires that leaders do both: evangelize and disciple, and that will require initiating believers with priorities based in the Word and not in our cultural tastes. There is a foundational complement of gifts that were common to the early church's understanding as a disciple's basic beginning point. Further, these are referenced by and inherent in The Great Commission, and hereby Jesus calls each of us who lead to a constancy of conviction and commitment to apply it in all its points and implications.

Seeing the "Component Parts" of the commission

While the Great Commission is not complex, it is not complete in one text. We are benefited and taught by its occurrence in all the Gospels and in Acts. Each part of the Bible's record of it incorporates aspects of our Lord's intentions. Note the several component passages and the distinctive features of each:

Matthew 28: Make disciples ... Go to all nations ... Baptize "in the Name of ..." Teach what I have commanded;

Mark 16: Go into all the world ... preach the Gospel ... miracle signs will confirm the Word.

Luke 24: Preach repentance-remission of sins ... Go to all nations ... Be endued with supernatural power.

John 20: "I sent you as I was sent ... Receive the Holy Spirit ... Forgive sins or retain sins."

Acts 1: Wait (receive) the Promise of the Father ... Witness to ends of the earth.

When those are, as they should be, joined to Jesus's declaration of His intent to "build My Church" (Mt. 16:13-19), as well as His description of His own ministry in Luke 4:18, 19 ("the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, etc.") these passages combine to summarize His concept of the message and ministry He was "commissioning," to a band of disciples who had been trained in His discipling process and knew what He meant by "make disciples." Thus, they "heard" and they obeyed:

The assignment: To go into all of the world and preach the "good news."

The "Good News": The word and works of God's anointed messengers.

The penetration: To bring deliverance and restoration of sin's work and power.

The expectation: "I will be with you;" ... Signs will confirm the message.

The message: Forgiveness and newness via repentance and water baptism.

The requirement: "Receive power"--via "the Holy Spirit coming upon you."

The objective: To make disciples who learn and do what Jesus commissioned.

The strategy: To "build My Church" using "keys" that "bind, loose and prevail."

With these basic of the commission, and the apostolic perceptions of those elements, we want to look more closely at the specific pivot point Jesus described for "making disciples". But beforehand, there are some who may have perceived reasons or past experiences for caution when the word "discipleship" is placed on the table. Allow me to remove doubt by clarifying this point.

Affirming "New Testament Discipleship"

Briefly, let us disqualify any misinterpretations of "discipleship" born in confusion and advanced in error, where "authority" may have been imposed or legalistic systems of "submission" have lead to regimentation or de-personalization. These aberrations understandably cause some to become instantly guarded when "discipleship" is mentioned, by reason of the hearing of others, or having been exploited themselves, by human inventions and methods that oppress rather than release. We wholly reject and disdain such as unbiblical and unworthy, but in bold contrast, we want to urge each leader to answer Jesus' call to "make disciples". He demonstrated exactly what He meant by this, and we need not fear where He or His Word will take us if we remain in its confines, and maintain the same Spirit of Jesus who said, "The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." True "discipleship" results from strong leaders pouring themselves out for those they lead. Accordingly, confusion or error cannot survive in the light of Jesus' own ministry, nor can the substance of His intention be diluted by tradition when we look into the New Testament for our definition of how we are to "disciple" believers.

Ephesians 4:11-16 set forward those leadership ministries Christ gives to His Church. Their assignment is to "equip"--that is, to bring to health and stability in Christ, to lead unto fullness and enrichment under Christ, and to cultivate fruitful ministry as Christ's. Being "equipped for ... ministry" (Gk., *katartidzo*) points to the leadership task of serving, teaching and nurturing in a way that "every member" will be enfranchised in the fullness and freedom of life in Christ, and be made effective in ways that further "edify the Body"--i.e., both (a) build up the Body of Christ by ministering to others in ways that bring people to the Savior, and (b) serve the Body of Christ in ways that show Jesus' love and care for each other.

There is a fatal flaw in any concept of discipleship that either (1) teaches but does not cultivate and release into ministry (Bible-centered but not ministry-focused); or (2) leads in any way that dominates, cultivates hierarchy or demands control of those "being disciplined". Jesus not only said "the greatest among you shall be the servant of all," He also taught in ways that cultivated people who replicated His ministry, and told them, "the works I do shall you do and greater than these shall you do". Thus, proceeding in that spirit, let us "make disciples".

When Jesus said, "Make Disciples," what did those hearing him think he meant?

They saw "making disciples" as doing the following: (1) To bring believers to stability and confidence in Christ; (2) To teach believers to be baptized as Jesus said; (3) To lead believers to receive the baptism with the Holy Spirit; (4) To grow believers who learn and live in the love of Jesus; (5) To train the believer in the Word and the doctrine; (i.e., lifestyle); (6) To equip believers to understand ministry gifts and power; (7) To point believers toward Christ-like ministry as Kingdom agents.

These elements were combined to frame the early church's conception of itself and its mission (identity) and its source and expectations (power and objective). Their vision and values were framed solely by how Jesus had trained and empowered them, and by what they had seen Him do and He now assigned that they would do. In short, Jesus' commission was defined to them by His Person and His works, which He said He designed and destined to be replicated in them and multiplied through them. Thus we would conclude: In the context Christ gave it, The Great Commission must be understood as His command that:

1. Faithful leaders will make disciples--

that all who would come to Jesus Christ not only believe on and make confession of Him unto salvation, but that they be baptized in water--water baptism being commanded an essential companion to "evangelizing" and as the first step in becoming a disciple.

2. That "believers" and "disciples" are not the same thing--

that "disciples" are not defined solely as "believers," but as those who have been taught and brought to baptism as an introduction to those dimensions of life, obedience, empowering and service that Jesus Christ wants to grow in His followers.

3. That water baptism is an "entry," not just an "experience"--

that Jesus' words "baptizing them in the Name ..." is vastly more than a required formula, but they summarize an "entry level" moment opening to growth in those essential dynamics into which His followers are to be "discipled"--led, taught and shaped.

4. That this initiation to discipleship is pivotal--

that Jesus plan for reaching all the world with the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 24:14) is that His fullness and ministry be incarnated in and ministered by members of His Body, the Church--revealing the character, compassion, power and works of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in and flowing through discipled believers.

This summary draws us to see in Jesus' commission

A Leadership mandate regarding water baptism

The text of The Great Commission calls each of us who lead--who intend to obey Jesus and "make disciples", to prepare new believers to come to baptism:

to enter the waters with joy, rejoicing in Father God's gift of salvation, forgiveness, acceptance and eternal promise;

to see the moment as obedience--their death to self and surrender to life in Jesus as Lord and Christ, as they testify to Him as their Savior-Deliverer; and,
to expect to receive Jesus' promise--that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and you shall receive power," as they open to the promise of that fullness that will grow and advance them in life as a "disciple" of Jesus Christ the Son of

God.

We may become more completely focused as we see and boldly embrace this assertion: The "initiation rites"--the basics of beginning NT life in Jesus's fullness is wrapped in the words of Jesus's baptismal instruction. Within it is the "Trinitarian package" of the initiations inherent baptism, the experience(s) basic to becoming a functioning "disciple".

Look with me at this triplet of basic qualifications for moving forward as a disciple (on NT terms) as it appears to be summarized in the baptismal directive Jesus gave in His Commission as Matthew reports it:

"Make disciples ... baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The simple yet direct substance of these words centers in the Savior's making them so crucial--that "at a given point" (aorist participle) making disciples; begins by framing a pathway that opens into "all that is in the Name of";--i.e. in the richness of the personhood of the whole Godhead, announced and opening up in that moment. In striking contrast to the "moment" of baptism being the making of the disciple, the process of following through is in the present tense employed in the words "teaching them." In short, Jesus may be interpreted as saying:

"I command you to baptize in water those who repent and believe on Me;
"and as you do--at that moment, as you speak over them the Name of the Living God in the scope of His being, in that act and by those words--
"you will be "entering" the person into a realm the water only represents; i.e.,
"into a river-flow that you must continue on with them, teaching them the multiple dimensions of life into which they are being brought--dimensions that will enable, equip, qualify them for ministers of my life to others."

This concept is supported by scholars who are unanimous that herewith Jesus establishes baptism as the condition of discipleship; a fact only declared in Matthew's gospel. As A.B. Bruce notes, at baptism, "eis to onoma, into the name; ... embodies the essence of the Christian creed ... didaskontes, teaching them;,, present participle, implying a continuous process (both) preparing for baptism, but continuing after baptism with a view of enabling disciples ... " .

The richness inherent in the phrase "baptizing them in the Name" suggests infinitely more than a formula properly to be repeated at baptism, it indicates an entry into the realities in the Name--the threefold richness of God's being as He is revealed to us in the mystery of the Trinity, Father-Son-Holy Spirit. While the grandeur of His being defies human analysis, the scope of His intent in baptism is clear: water baptism is the entry point into the increasing flow of God's graces toward us, in us and through us.

To outline this scope, consider: the believer's being baptized into the Name--

"of the Father"--testifying to our entry into the Father's Family.

It is by our repentance toward God and our faith in Jesus Christ that we are brought to the Father and born-again as sons and daughters--our water baptism literally testifying to our having been "baptised into Christ's Body" by the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 12:12-13), and thereby our entry into the Father's family.

The repentance and faith expressed in coming to water baptism is basic to opening the believer to that deepening, internal witness of the Father's pleasure. It is to launch a life (1) secured in one's assurance of salvation, with (2) ever-increasing faith flowing from knowing the rest and peace of an established relationship with God.

The focus here is on assurance of our relationship with God ...

"of the Son"--obediently yielding to Jesus and into discipleship in Him.

In submitting to being baptized in water, we declare our commitment to Christ's Lordship over our lives and our will to live and grow as His servant (Mark 16:16). Discipleship under Christ is intended to be within a community of believers and under the guidance of spiritual leaders. Entering unto discipleship in Christ, we are answering His call to surrender to life (1) of learning and living "all that Jesus said"--growing in obedience and humility; and (2) of growing in doing "all that Jesus did," as we are instructed and function in the authority He delegates to us as members of His Body.

The focus here is on Christ's Lordship and our becoming disciplined in His way.

"of the Holy Spirit"--opening into the flow of "rivers of living water."

In coming to the waters of baptism, it is consistent with the teaching and practice of the NT Church that, when instructed, believers were led to expect and generally experience Jesus's baptism in the Holy Spirit. When this did not take place (i.e., when people were baptized in water, but had not "been filled" with the Holy Spirit, further teaching and ministry was offered. *

Their concern was not that a creed be verified, but that each believer received power for their ministry as "witnesses of Christ" (i.e., as evidence for the case that Jesus is alive and is continuing all that He began to do and teach (Acts 1).

The focus here is on our need for the Holy Spirit's power and gifts ...

So many more leaders, sensitized to the Holy Spirit, awakened to this hour in which we live, and more concerned about Jesus's plan for building His Church that human designs for building a church, are "seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (i.e., His way of "getting it right!"). In hope of underscoring the essence of our leadership call (evangelize, baptize, teach), we have looked in the substance of the objective: the replication of Jesus's ministry to, in and through His redeemed and disciplined, grace-filled, Spirit-empowered, faithful, gift-bearing sons and daughters!

In that light, let us look at the trio of commands which are, as we've seen, inherent in their rich implications in The Great Commission. And in concluding, let each leader be thoughtful to ask himself or herself those questions that will keep us focused on what we're actually called to be "up to" as Jesus's servants.

"You must be born again." (Unless you are ... you cannot see the Kingdom.)

A leader must ask: How does "a decision" and "regeneration" interface?

A leader might ask: Do I issue premature "birth" announcements?

In proclaiming forgiveness, I point to Jesus as Savior and issue an invitation to repentance and life.

"Repent and be baptized." (Unless you are converted ... become as a child.)

A leader must ask: How do "forgiveness" and "repentance" interface?

A leader might ask: Is obedience to "be baptized" the pivot-point?

In directing to water baptism, I point the way to Jesus's Lordship and introduce the believer to the path of discipleship

"Receive the Holy Spirit." (Have you received ... since you believed?)

A leader must ask: How do "water baptism" and "Spirit-baptism" interface?

A leader might ask: What constitutes a full introduction to Jesus Christ?

In instructing a baptismal candidate, I point the way to an entry into both a fullness of joy (repentance) and of power (Spirit-baptism).

*Clearly, by NT standards, before historic neglect or doctrinaire argumentation were substituted, the baptism with the Holy Spirit (or being filled with the Holy Spirit) was ministered as a part of the "initiating rites" of the Church. Water baptism was and is intended to include preparing believers to "hunger and thirst after righteousness," requiring leaders (as Peter, John and Paul did) to prepare candidates to make this occasion--beside a declaration of faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ--a declaration also of their availability to being filled with the Holy Spirit. Appropriately, then, leaders must be taught more than a doctrine, but be equipped in how to minister in a way that leads believers unto a scripturally sound, personal and experiential entry into the Spirit's fullness in their lives.