

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Called to Share, Invited to Belong
Matthew 28:16-20
April 12, 2026

Around twenty-five years ago I was serving First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garland – an historic congregation nearly as old as ours.¹ That summer, I led an adventurous group of high school students on a mission trip to Mexico. For many of these young people this was their first time to leave our country.

The preparation for the experience was considerable. It was an outside of our comfort zone effort to live out our faith. And, it was an act of obedience that seemed to fulfill the first part of the instruction in this morning's Gospel lesson, which is a passage that many call the Great Commission.

Go . . . Go and make disciples of all nations.² The commission begins with a call to leave our country of origin and travel to another.

The world has changed a great deal in the 2,000+ years since we received this guidance. As a result, one no longer has to travel nearly as far to encounter a very different world.

A few years after that Mexico experience, while I was serving a congregation in Southwest Florida, I led a high energy group of middle school students on a summer mission trip to South Carolina. For many in our group this was the first time they ever traveled outside of Florida. This interstate experience stretched the participants just as much if not more than the international one.

More recently, I've been on the receiving end. In my work as the CEO of White Rock Center of Hope, I welcome a number of students every summer who are engaged in urban mission trips. While some participants are from other states, it's often Texans from rural and suburban areas who are most surprised when exposed to the realities of urban poverty.

¹ First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Fort Worth was established in 1855. First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Garland was established twenty years later in 1875.

² Matthew 28:19.

Rethinking “Go”

I wonder if Jesus were reissuing this part of the commission today how he might revise or update it. In authorizing disciples to carry on his ministry in the world what might he say?

Perhaps twenty-first century Jesus would say, “Whether you are going or staying, wherever life places you, you will find yourself among people of every nation, every story, every experience. Don’t withdraw into a safe and familiar bubble. Instead, show up and pay attention. Build relationships. Love the people right in front of you.”

In other words, the “go” component is not something only youth groups do nor is it something only done in the summer nor is it something only done by traveling to other nations or states. As we go about our daily lives, we are called to live into our identity as disciples by living in relationship with others.

That may sound reasonable, however, no sermon on this passage would be complete without mentioning the ways that, in going, people carrying out Great Commission Christianity have done harm.

Did you know that the name “Great Commission” is a modern term first offered by and ultimately popularized by missionaries? Have you ever considered how this name shapes our perceptions of the passage? Are you aware that, for many, it created an “us” versus “them” mentality?³

And that framing has led many people, acting in the name of Jesus across the centuries, to use this passage to engage in colonialism and even to resort to violence. Sadly, these troubling tendencies aren’t limited to the past.

We must name that Christian nationalism is not Christian at all. Our efforts to go and share must never become a quest to remake others into our own image or that of our nation or culture.⁴

³ The term was likely coined by Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz in the seventeenth century. It was popularized by British missionary Hudson Taylor in the nineteenth century.

⁴ For more on Mainline Protestant involvement, I recommend reading *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism* by Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood (Chalice Press, 2024). I named this book of the top books of 2024 on my So What Faith blog. That post is available at sowhatfaith.com/2024/12/18/15th-annual-top-10-books-of-the-year/

Remembering Baptizing and Teaching

Put positively, the passage instructs followers of the Way – disciples of Jesus – to be and make disciples. Our Gospel lesson says that the disciple making includes baptizing and teaching.⁵

Let's pause here to consider an important question:
How does someone who isn't a Christian become one?

While each person's story is unique, a common framework is helpful.

Most of us grew up understanding there was a logical sequence:
belief, behavior, and belonging.

Those born into a Christian family were brought up in the church. From our earliest years we were taught what to believe at home and in our churches through Sunday school and children's ministry.

As we got older, we were encouraged to show others what we were learning by practicing Christian behaviors, including praying, worshipping, and living by the Golden Rule.

Then, perhaps as an older child or a young teenager, we were ready to complete the triad with a ritual of belonging. With our confession of faith and baptism, we became members of a local congregation.

This same approach works for adults when they become Christian or when they transition from one denomination to radically different denomination. These folks start at the beginning. They begin with belief. They either leave behind a non-Christian belief system for a Christian one or leave behind one form of Christian belief for another.

Reconsidering (or The Great Reversal)

Diana Butler Bass, a popular author and widely recognized expert on American Christianity, helps us rethink the model I just shared. She invites us to consider what she calls "The Great Reversal," which is a reordering of these 3 "B" words.⁶

⁵ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁶ Diana Bulter Bass. *Christianity without Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (HarperOne, 2012). See Chapter 7. Also available online as "The Great Reversal" in the Winter 2011 edition of Lifelong Faith at www.lifelongfaith.com/uploads/5/1/6/4/5164069/great_reversal_-_bass.pdf

She suggests that the order I just reviewed with you – and the one you likely assumed was normative – was prevalent for around 500 years. It, however, was neither the pattern of the early church nor will it be the pattern of the future church. The ancient church and the future church both start with belonging then move to behaving and, only after exploring both, get to believing.

Did you catch the new order? The way religion is working for more and more people today? It begins with belonging.

Diana Butler Bass says this pattern can be found in nearly everything we might choose to do in our lives outside of religion. To help us think this through she uses knitting as an example.

Imagine someone like me who knows very little about knitting wants to become a knitter. I would not be served well by studying the distinctives of various knitting styles. Instead, I'd do better to begin by going to a local craft store or by asking my friends if they knew of any nearby knitting groups. My first real step would be to start attending a knitting group.

I'd want to join a welcoming group that was okay assisting a newcomer. I'd need them to show me how read a pattern, hold a needle, and how to move my hands.

Slowly, over time, as I sat alongside other knitters I'd make scarves, hats, and perhaps some mittens. And, I'd begin to form my own ideas about knitting. My beliefs about knitting would only really make sense after belonging and behaving.⁷

So What?

So, knowing this, perhaps your anxiety about the Great Commission has been greatly reduced.

This passage of Scripture is important. It is given by Jesus as a way of empowering his disciples to continue his ministry. And this is a large group that includes all of us.

⁷ Ibid.

More than anything, it is an invitation to lead highly relational lives and a call to be authentically ourselves in all relationships. For those of us who follow the Way of Jesus, being Christian should be a core part of our identity.

And our identity is as a specific kind of Christian – as those who are part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). As we start our exploration of the Jesus’ Priorities, we do so from this vantage. This is why I invited us to read the Preamble to the Design aloud together before coming to the table today. While Disciples do not have any creeds, we are united by this affirmation.⁸

And as Disciples, frankly, we are well suited for this new world. We are a people who trust that belonging can be discovered in the act of showing up, of sharing bread, of walking alongside one another. We are a people who make room for questions, who refuse to confuse certainty with faith, and who believe the Spirit is still at work shaping us together. And, we are a people who value unity over uniformity, who practice a radical welcome, and who find our center in Christ rather than in creeds.

Thinking back to the many mission trips I’ve been on, including the ones I shared this morning, I’m thankful they provided the participants with considerable opportunities to practice building relationships with people they may otherwise have never met.

This morning, my mind has gotten stuck on the idea of belonging.

I wonder . . . How did you come to be a Christian? And, I also wonder . . . How did you originally come to belong here at First Christian and why have you chosen to continue belong?

However you answered those questions, it is my hope that you have found a deep and abiding sense of belonging in the family of God and in the life of this congregation. And, it is my expectation that you will live out your faith in highly relational ways.

Let’s get started by inviting those we meet to come and see. Amen.

⁸ We read the Preamble from the Chalice Hymnal (#329). The full document, “The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)” is available on the denomination’s website at disciples.org/our-identity/the-design/