

The Great Commission

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Matthew 28:18-20

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.’”

“*As it was in the beginning, so it shall be, evermore and evermore,*” the angels sing to the eternal Trinity before the throne. In the same way at the ending of Matthew, the author takes us back to the beginning and concludes his story of Jesus echoing the same refrains with which it began. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me,” he said to the eleven. This reminds us of the temptation when from a high mountain, the devil showed Jesus ‘all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time’ and said to him, “All these I will give to you, if you but worship me.”¹ Jesus declined but here on a mountain in Galilee, he told us he gained his authority—all authority—in a better way. Also his closing words, “I am with you always,” remind us of what the archangel said to his mother, that her son would be Emmanuel, ‘which means God with us.’² So Jesus took his leave as he came. I love it when in a book or story the conclusion comes and the reader can see the way the plot comes full circle. *As it was in the beginning, so it shall be, evermore and evermore.*

That is interesting to an author, but the point of this passage is the missionary character with which it frames Jesus’ last instructions to his followers. He assigned them tasks: “Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always.” It is true they would not be alone in this assignment. They will have each other and those who convert to Jesus. They will also have him with them in this work. Barclay noted, they were “sent out...on the greatest task in the world, but with the greatest presence in the world.”³

“Yes, all well and good,” you say. As I read his description of his church and its mission, I must ask, *is our church like that?* Are we still making disciples? Are we missionaries as he told us to be? Is our congregation making disciples? Last week’s confirmation rite is certainly about our success in that area and today’s reception of new members is about the same. Whether we

¹ Matthew 4:8-9.

² Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:4. I am indebted to Robert H. Gundry for these two insights. See his Matthew, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 595 and 597.

³ Barclay, William, The Gospel of Matthew. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), vol. 2, 417.

are ‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’ might be arguable but we are making a good stab at it. We have a process, classes, volunteers and professionals who teach about the faith. Still I wonder about our results. One of the questions I keep asking myself: “are we teaching faith or just *about* faith?”

It is the missionary focus of our religion in texts like the one read to us this morning that we seem to have lost somewhere. We have compartmentalized our lives. Church here, work there. Worship on Sundays, unless something else calls. Mission is something our denomination does, isn’t it, not us? Yet, Jesus commissioned his closest disciples to make more disciples, and I am struck by the discontinuity between the Lord’s expectations and our reality. My old friend Bob Luccock commented about the missionary imperative of this text and our discomfort with it. He said, it is, “Like a side dish of succotash which the waiter mysteriously brought, good if you like that sort of thing, but which you certainly didn’t order.”⁴

We are to make disciples, baptize them and teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded. Granted there are some things not all of us are good at but the way Jesus spoke, mission does not seem like it is optional for us, something on which we may take a pass. Bob Walbridge went out to Utah to ski one winter. While in Salt Lake City with a wait for transportation, he decided to go see the famous Mormon Temple. He even got to hear their wonderful choir rehearse when he went in. He looked about and admired it. Thinking he could now check this off his list, he prepared to leave. He noticed there were people talking to the tourists as they walked by outside the temple. He managed to avoid it on the way in but didn’t on the way out. They turned out to be Mormons handing out tracts and talking about their faith. Walbridge told me they seemed to him not very polished, just average church folks. What he was surprised by was how effective they were at talking about their faith. Being a lifelong New Englander and Congregationalist, he had never seen this before. Had they been more professional, he said, he would have been inclined to dismiss their testimonies. “But,” he told me, “their words were quite moving, genuine, like they really believed it.” He told me this story some twenty or more years ago. I’ve never forgotten it. Why? Because he was moved by the sincerity and simplicity of their witness. That seems to me part of what we miss in our discipleship and missionary outreach.

It is easy to think we need to be professionals at this sort of thing. But is that so? In another place in Scripture we are told we should always be ready to give an account of the hope that is in us.⁵ Few of us do anymore. Have you noticed even many ministers are not particularly good at mission and disciple making? Yet it is a calling clergy and lay all have. Do we not know why or how Jesus has made a difference in our lives? It is not so much about being able to quote Scripture as it is about giving testimony to what Jesus has meant to us in our experience, not

⁴ Luccock, Robert E. Preaching Through Matthew. (Nashville, Abingdon, 1980), 227.

⁵ Hebrews 3:15.

someone else's. Unless we have become so callused about it that we don't notice such things anymore, we all have moments when we sense we should say something to a friend in trouble, in need, confused, searching. We can always invite them to come to church and see for themselves.⁶ Of all places where Jesus' spirit might be found, I hope that it is here in our fellowship. That is the *outreach* part of evangelism.

But that brings up the second part of evangelism. The early church had such a winning quality about it. Those early congregations and fellowships were so special that if people became part of them, it transformed the members spiritually. It wasn't just the 'news' of the church which converted them. They encountered Jesus in the other people in the church. Jesus said, "Wherever two or three of you are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."⁷ This is the *in reach* part of evangelism. Do you think our church has this quality that transforms people by the nature of its fellowship? If this is not, why not? We must intentionally make our congregation a place where people can not only hear the teachings of Jesus but can actually meet him here among people who believe in his cause and in him. This is the way a congregation makes disciples. We bring people into the fellowship, introduce them to Jesus and teach and show them how to be disciples. Some of us are better working in *outreach*, others at *in reach*. But both are important as we live up to this great commission of Jesus.

Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.' If this does not sound like why we are a church, let's do something about it! It is a matter not just of taking a message of faith to outsiders, but living that message with one another. When that happens we will be the kind of disciples who draw others to Jesus and make him more disciples.

End

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⁶ John 1:46. This 'come and see' evangelism is what many of the original disciples practiced.

⁷ Matthew 18:20.