

Measured by the Master's Piece, How Well Are We Doing?

Five years of this final decade of the millennium have now passed into history. There is no better time to carefully examine the Master's Piece and make appropriate in-course corrections in order to finish the task that remains!

by David J. Hesselgrave

Missionaries of a Far Eastern mission were working with me to develop a five-year church growth strategy for their target area. Suddenly during the third or fourth session, the facial expression of one of the group became almost painfully pensive. Then she said, "You know, the longer we discuss this the more convinced I become that we already have a growth plan." Sure enough, an extensive search of the mission files uncovered a five-year plan that had been developed five or six years previously. It had been carefully developed, artfully printed, dutifully filed, and promptly forgotten! No one had thought of building in periodic evaluations and in-course corrections!

All of us together have set out on a grand program for penetrating the frontiers and completing the task of world evangelization. The Lord be praised for this vision! The Holy Spirit has inspired it. And two thousand years ago our resurrected Lord mandated it. Unlike those missionaries in the Far East, we have not filed the Master's plan and forgotten it. In fact, in many churches and schools we quote Matthew 28:16-20 as often as John 3:16. But like those missionaries in Asia, we sometimes neglect to review the plan and make appropriate in-course corrections.

A Renowned Church Historian

The experience of a celebrated church historian of the first part of this century, Adolf Von Harnack, is revealing. Viewing the New Testament from his higher critical perspective, in 1908 he concluded that there is no reason for believing that Matthew himself recorded the words of chapter 28 verses 16 to 20, and that these verses very

probably constitute a later addition to the biblical text. By 1924, however, he had given much more attention to the passage and as a consequence changed his mind completely. In that year Von Harnack wrote that the mission "manifesto" in Matthew 28 is a "masterpiece" and that it is impossible to say anything "more or greater" in an equal number of words! [See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, p. 56).]

Few, if any, readers of these lines share Von Harnack's earlier view. We accept the text as genuine and authoritative. But certain questions remain. When reading and referring to this "mission masterpiece" do we share his later feeling of excitement at its magnificence? Do we who give so much attention to the "missionary thrust" of the passage really do justice to its "missionary substance"? If every one of the fifty-one Greek words of Christ's command in Matthew 28:18-20 is so pregnant with meaning that Von Harnack ultimately said what he did, would not anything approaching justice to the text require that we more carefully examine the meaning of those words individually and in relation to each other? Are we justified in simply using the text to support the work of our particular missionary undertaking or our special approach to Christian missions?

What exactly did our Lord command? How does what he commanded fit into the concentric contexts of Scripture? What implications might a more careful and concentrated consideration of the passage have for reaching our world for Christ? Though an exhaus-

tive examination of these questions is impossible here, it is possible to suggest some guidelines that a more studied investigation might take.

Command and Contexts

It is often said that no man is an island unto himself. The same can be said of any biblical text. The Matthean form of the Great Commission must be understood in relation to the various contexts in which it is "nested."

In relation to the whole of Scripture it bears a critical relationship to God's overarching plan of world redemption and the re-establishment of Divine rule over the whole of creation centered in Christ the Son. In no sense whatsoever is Matthew 28:16-20 a merely human interpolation or machination.

In relation to the Old Testament, this text represents a continuation and expansion of the Divine program to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3); to make Jehovah's way known on earth and his salvation known among all nations (Ps. 67:2). In both cases, there is a command and a promise, a commission and a covenant. The *modus operandi* may be different but the motive is the same!

In relation to the rest of the New Testament, all that follows this first appearance of the Great Commission rests upon it, providing information as to how it was carried out in the history of the early church and how it will eventually in the church and in the kingdoms of this world becoming the Kingdom of Christ.

In relation to the other Gospels with their complementary statements of

the Great Commission, it is important to see that the Matthean statement is the most complete and therefore the “textual touchstone” for understanding the others (including Acts 1:8). Exegetes who give precedence to the Johannine statement in their interpretation of mission theory, and practitioners who give precedence to the Markan statement in mission practice, do so at the risk of distorting biblical mission!

In relation to the Book of Matthew itself, the command and promise of chapter 28 verses 18 to 20 need to be understood in the light of critical passages in the rest of Matthew such as the genealogy tracing Christ back to Abraham and David in chapter 1; the sending of the seventy (or seventy-two) to the lost sheep of the house of Israel in chapter 10; Christ's promise to build his church in chapter 16; and the Olivet Discourse with its prediction of world evangelization and the judgment of the *ethne* in chapters 24 and 26. These passages both necessitate and illuminate Christ's commission as recorded in the last chapter.

Even a rather cursory analysis reveals that the text itself will serve to alert us to how much we miss when we confine ourselves to a hasty reading of the Great Commission. Though the text merits analysis from a variety of perspectives, our present purpose is perhaps best served by attempting a brief analysis in terms of its four universals and four imperatives (looking at the original text and the NASB).

Four Universals:

1) Jesus said that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him. The key words here are “all” and “authority.” The Authorized Version reads, “all power” but what we think of as “power” is in view in Acts 1:8. As indicated by most modern translations, “authority” is a better translation for the word *exousia* which is used here. The point is that no one in heaven or on

earth is in a position to question either the command or the promise in Matthew 28:18-20. Both emanate from the Sovereign Lord of the universe who has all authority!

2) *Panta ta ethne* (all the nations) are to be reached. Over the past forty years much has been written concerning this universal by missiologists and theologians alike. Almost all are agreed that it does not mean “nation states” as such. Many missiologists are convinced that it means “people groups”—groups of people who share a common ethnicity, language, culture and worldview. Although that may be an acceptable interpretation, it does entail certain problems. First, there is the practical problem evident in the number of different definitions of “people group” that have been offered. Second, there is the etymological problem that is evident in the fact that other Greek words seem to fit the “people group” idea just as well or better. That great psalm of praise in Revelation 5:9-10, for example, is offered by men from all tribes, (*phule*), tongues (*glossa*), and people (*laos*) as well as all the nations (*ethne*). Third, still another interpretation has it that *panta ta ethne* is best understood as “all the Gentiles” (not exclusive of the Jews). This is the rather obvious meaning of *ethne* in a variety of other passages. However, here its significance is that, though Jesus confined his earlier commission in Matthew 10 to reaching the “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” in Matthew 28 he widened it to include all the Gentiles as well as Jews.

The latter view is shared by the majority of theologians. At any rate, what must not be lost in these discussions is the importance of “*panta*—“all” the various peoples of the world are to be reached with the Gospel of Christ!

3) “All that [Christ] commanded” is to be taught so that the Lord's disciples obey it. All that Jesus commanded embraces the whole of the Old Testament

because Jesus commanded his followers to “search the Scriptures” which were available to them (John 5:39). It also includes the whole of the New Testament because Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit who would disclose the things of Christ to the apostles (John 16:14). The message, then, is inclusive of all that God has revealed in his Holy Word, that He wants them to observe and to obey!

4) The last universal has to do with a promise. The Lord Jesus promised to be with those going forth in his name, “always, even to the end of the age.” There is never a time, no matter how fraught with difficulty or discouragement, that he does not accompany his sent ones! There is never a place to which, or a people to whom, Christ dispatches his representatives but that He too is there in them and with them! Note that more than the encouragement and comfort of the missionary is involved here. Christ himself is present whenever and wherever his “sent ones” are present and ministering. Therefore, the response of the *ethne* to the missionary and his/her message is really their response to Christ and his Gospel (See Matthew 10:40-42 and 25:34-46).

Four Imperatives:

The interpreter must be careful here. It is widely understood that, in the original text, there is only one imperative as such (i.e., “make disciples” or “disciple”). The other verbs in the passage are actually participles which participate in the imperatival force of the main verb to various degrees. That is the justification for speaking here of “four imperatives.” However, though all of this is quite widely understood by mission leaders, it is all too often disregarded in their passion to involve the church in “reaching the world for Christ.” But that is most unfortunate because the three participles tell us how the task of making disciples is to be carried out—by going, baptizing and teaching.

1) First, then, we are to “make disciples.” This is critical. The missionary objective is to produce exactly what those first hearers of the Great Commission in fact were: disciples, students, learners, apprentices, followers of the Lord Jesus! Of course, they were also converts and believers. And later they were called Christians. But the designation that was most encompassing was “disciple.” That is what they were, and that is what we are! And that is what we, by God’s enablement, are sent to produce in all the nations and peoples of the earth!

2) “Going” is involved. Many translations make it more forceful: “Go, therefore.” But some translate it, “As you go,” Still others retain the participial form and translate it “Going.” The differences are understandable because, given the Greek construction of the sentence, this participle has less force than “baptizing” and “teaching.” It would seem important, however, to retain some imperatival force. Note, for example, the “Macedonian call” in Acts 16:9 where the man of Macedonia says to Paul “Come (or “coming”) to Macedonia and help us.” The construction is the same as in the Great Commission. But it is difficult to understand how Paul could “help” unless he “came.” Similarly, the Great Commission to “disciple all the peoples” *panta ta ethne* of the world can hardly be carried out apart from going into all the world. So “going” is necessary, but to go without a clear understanding of what the task is and how to go about accomplishing it is quite futile. In other words, the first step in making disciples is to *go*, but unless we know what we are to *do* and how to go about doing it, the “going” in and of itself is pointless.

3) Disciples are to be made by “baptizing.” It is easy to read too much in this. It is just as easy to read too little into it. The rite of baptism is in view, but at the same time much more than the rite is in view. Those who are enroute to

discipleship must repent and be converted. They must turn from their old ways and begin walking the new way, the “Jesus way.” Basically that is what baptism is all about, and it must not be overlooked. When Philip went to the Ethiopian eunuch, he believed and was baptized (Acts 8:38). When Peter went to the household of Cornelius and

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they believed, he ordered them to be baptized (Acts 10:48). When Paul and Silas did go to Macedonia and the jailer and his household believed, they were baptized immediately (Acts 16:33). However, when the rite of baptism and the person of the baptizer became an occasion for misunderstanding the essence of Christ’s teachings, Paul was able to remind the Corinthians that he himself had baptized very few and that he was not first of all sent to baptize but to preach the Gospel (I Cor. 1:11-17). “Going” does not “make disciples” unless the “goer” does more than that. “Baptizing” does not “make disciples” unless more is involved.

4) Finally, and most important in this disciple making process, is teaching them to observe (to obey) all Christ has commanded. Depending on the situation this may require considerable time

and no small amount of patience, but it is absolutely essential if disciples are to be produced. Look at the missionary outreach in the Book of Acts, it will become immediately apparent that the heart and soul of it was preaching and teaching, and that these were not distinct nor disparate from each other. It will also become apparent that preaching/teaching was encompassing—more a recital of the whole story of revelation and divine acts than a reduction to one particular story of three or four truths of the Gospel.

Mid-Course Corrections

Upon looking back, almost all who have had experience in pioneering missions reflect on things they would have done differently and better if they could start over. Perhaps this is the time when all of us who share a concern for reaching the unreached and fulfilling the Great Commission catch our breath and stop long enough to review that commission and what it says vis-a-vis our present assumptions and strategies. For starters, we might consider the following four concerns:

First, there is the matter of *motivation*. It has often been said that the primary motivation for mission is obedience to Christ’s command. Indeed, Christ’s claim to absolute authority supports that idea. But he does not call for blind obedience to a command devoid of preparation or precedents. The Mandate in Matthew 28 is a kind of capstone of a divine plan to bless the world’s peoples that stretches back to a faithful Abraham and forward to a reigning Christ, indeed from eternity to eternity. The command and its promise place the obedient disciple in the very center of the eternal plan of God! More and more I have come to believe that to be really effective in challenging God’s people to obey the Great Commission in its fullness, the Commission itself must be set in the context of that grand and encompassing plan! That weak, erring, sinful humans,

although saved such as we are, could possibly be thus engaged is a staggering notion. But to that we are called! What could be more magnificent? What could be more motivating?

Second, there is the matter of *defining our mission* in the world. In a recent seminar I was called upon once again to deal with one brother theologian's proposal that socio-political action and evangelism-church planting be thought of as more or less equal partners in our mission in the modern world. Even more recently in various contexts I have been confronted with the following proposals as ways in which we can "fulfill the Great Commission":

1) Join a tour group which will take a ten-day tour of five cities in country A and devote an hour or two to passing out Gospels of John in each city.

2) Support a short-termer who would like to visit resort B in Europe and "just hang around crowded areas and talk to people about the Lord."

3) Form a "prayer team" that will go to world class city C and "just march through the city and pray."

Now certainly much can be said for ministering to the "whole person." And, depending on the circumstances, for standing on a street corner and distributing the Gospel of John; for talking to people about the Lord; for praying for a city and its people; and so on (and on). But the single most complete statement of the Great Commission is in Matthew 28:18-20 and it defines mission in terms of discipling all peoples. This is first and foremost a spiritual undertaking, though it will entail doing all manner of good things for our neighbors in need. At the same time, all "spiritual" exercises do not have the same value in discipling the peoples of the world and none of them should be thought of as the fulfillment of the Great Commission. They may, or may not, contribute to its fulfillment. But "fulfill" (read, "fill full")? Hardly!

Third, and closely related to the foregoing, is the matter of how we understand the *various components* of the Matthew mandate. Throughout the modern missions era Christians have been challenged to "go" as though that were the basic requirement of the Great Commission and willingness to "go" were the litmus test of missionary dedication. That this challenge is misguided is apparent, not only by a careful consideration of the text, but also by the fact that "going" abroad has become one of the attractive things about missions (especially short-term missions) — analogous to "Join the Navy and see the World."

Also, for whatever reasons, "disciple-making" has come to mean gathering the most promising believers together and training them to become really good, productive, leader-type believers. Now, training leaders is both good and necessary. But the Great Commission does not reinforce that idea of discipleship at all. From the very beginning, the mandated goal of mission is to make disciples. Not just decisions though decision is involved. Not just converts though conversion is involved. Not just believers though faith is involved. But *disciples*. This is not just a semantic distinction. It is a distinction that goes to the very heart of our understanding of, and approach to, world evangelization.

Fourth, then, there is the matter of missing on *strategy and methodology*. We often read that the New Testament has little or nothing to say about strategies and methods but only about men. That eminent author of *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*", Roland Allen, would roll over in his grave if he heard anyone say that! So would the likes of Rufus Anderson, Henry Venn, John Nevius and Donald McGavran. The facts are otherwise. Not only do Acts and the epistles speak loudly and clearly on this matter but, as we have

seen, Great Commission itself lays down a basic strategy that is ignored at the peril of mission. Von Harnack was really right when he concluded that it would be practically impossible to say anything more or more important in an equal number of words than is said in these concluding words of Matthew's Gospel. Here we are told, not only what to do, but *how to go about it*. Illumined by the rest of the Scriptures, going, baptizing in the Name, and teaching all to obey what Christ has commanded constitute a basic strategy that will be used of God the Holy Spirit to disciple the world's peoples and build the Church of Christ around the world!

In Conclusion

More words are being spoken and written about the mission of the Church than ever before in history. Praise God for mission concern, compassion and commitment. May all increase until the whole world knows the truth of Jesus Christ! But in addition this new compassion can also be frustrating. The barrage of missionary verbiage, summaries of statistical gains, plethora of innovative proposals and multiplication of worldwide ministries can effect a numbing of spiritual sensitivities and an abrogation of good sense—even our own. There is, after all, but one real Master Plan of mission—one true *magnum opus* on the subject—and it is authored by God himself. At the heart of God's great book on missions is the "Master's-Piece" of Matthew 28. As we approach the end of the millennium, there is no better time to carefully examine the Master's Piece and make appropriate in-course corrections in order to finish the task that remains for the glory of our God!

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