

More and Better Disciples The Great Commission

May 7, 2017
Steve DeWitt

Every once in a while a sermon connects in a way that you throw your preaching schedule away. Last week's message was one of those messages. I didn't anticipate it. I thought it was kind of a normal one. But then God added his unction and blessing and I've heard so much from so many. Our pastors met and decided it was time to dispense with the preaching plan and go with the flow of God's movement.

Perhaps you missed last week and now you are really curious. What was last week about? It was entitled, *The King's Speech*. Jesus' last words recorded in Matthew's gospel. They are last to emphasize their importance. It's like when you have to stop saying something to hear its echo. The silence after Matthew 28:20 is meant to let those words echo for centuries as the church and Christians wrestle with why we are here and what we are to be doing. Here are those words:

"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 behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'" (Matthew 28:18–20 ESV)

This is often called the Great Commission. The resurrected and glorified Jesus deputizes his disciples and casts a vision, a mission, for all other disciples who would come after. He doesn't begin with what we are to do; he begins with who he is. *"All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me."* By virtue of his death and resurrection from the dead, God the Father bestows on Jesus full and final authority over everything and everybody, everywhere. Now every realm in heaven and earth, the physical and the spiritual, is a sphere of authority ruled by Jesus as King and Lord.

Therefore, since I am who I am, go and make disciples of all nations. The prime directive of the mission is *"make disciples."* A disciple is a follower of Jesus. Following begins with conversion and professing faith and allegiance to King Jesus. But that's not all. Being a disciple also has a goal—observing everything Jesus commanded. It's a lifestyle of submission and obedience to the reign of Jesus. A life lived out from a heart where Jesus is enthroned.

This disciple-making mission will have certain qualities that mark it. *Go.* If the nations will be reached, to the nations we must go. *Baptize.* Baptism is an outward sign of inward faith. And *teaching*—the goal is not the filling of the air with words but aims for equipping the disciple to live according to God's Word. Jesus concludes with the incredible promise to be with us always and everywhere and for all of time. Jesus' presence is with his church by the Holy Spirit and he will never leave us, and never forsake us as we labor to make disciples.

I then shared my personal perspective on how we are doing overall as a church. If the goal is more and better disciples, I think we do better at the "better" and worse at the "more." While we have people come to Christ, it is much more common for a person to arrive at Bethel with some level of faith and for that faith to flourish here. Praise God for that. But how long has it been since you built a relationship with someone in your life and shared the

gospel with them? I think it's likely been too long, especially if the prime directive is to make disciples.

So let's talk about this more.

The Less-Famous Still-Inspired Great Commission Statements

So much is made of Matthew 28 and rightly so. However, it is not the only such statement by Jesus. Let's look at three others that color this mission more fully.

"Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld." (John 20:21-23)

John's Great Commission passage has a sending theme. *"As the Father has sent me."* Who was the first missionary? Jesus. Jesus was God the Father's emissary to us. He came in obedience to the will of the Father. *"Even so I am sending you."* The Father sent the Son and the Son sends us. Was Jesus obedient to his sending? Are we?

"Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:45-49)

Luke authored the gospel of Luke and what we call Acts or the Acts of the Apostles. His main theme is seen in this Great Commission passage. Jesus opens their minds to understand the Scriptures and then connects the Old Testament revelation with his own life and ministry. He helps them understand the Bible, he exegetes the Bible in a Messianic summary, and then commissions them. It would be easy to think that the gospel and mission of the New Testament are so new and radical that they don't tie in with the old. Jesus is careful to explain it through the grid of Scripture. The mission of God flows from the Word of God about the Son of God to produce the people of God.

Verse 48 is the key and is Luke's repeated theme through the book of Acts. *"You are witnesses of these things."* A witness. What's that? A witness is someone who tells what they have seen or what they have experienced. An eyewitness in a trial case is a powerful testimony. *This is what I saw...*

Our fourth commission passage is from Luke's second volume, the book of Acts.

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

This verse forms the outline of not just the book of Acts but the history of the church.

Acts 1-7	The gospel goes to Israel
Acts 8	The gospel goes to Samaria
Acts 8:26ff.	The gospel goes to Africa (Ethiopian Eunuch), Europe (Paul), and the ends of the earth (-2017)

In Acts 1, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will come. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost and indwells the disciples, the church begins, 3,000 are converted and baptized the very first day, and the mission springs to life and has been spreading to the ends of the earth ever since.

So to summarize, Matthew 28 emphasizes making disciples. John emphasizes our being sent. Luke emphasizes being witnesses to Jesus. Are these four different missions? No, they are four ways of looking at the same mission. What is it?

Here is our church mission statement:

"To glorify God by making fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who worship and exalt Him in all things. We strive to fulfill this purpose as we: devote ourselves to the preaching, study, and application of God's Word; seek the Lord in earnest prayer; experience the power of authentic, life-changing fellowship; and engage our community and the world with the gospel of Christ." (Bethel Church Constitution)

Good? I think so. It faithfully reflects the mission language of Scripture. Why we are here? We are here to make disciples—more and better disciples. Yes, to the glory of God as the overarching first priority. But practically, more and better disciples. Why all the organization? Why elders and deacons and pastors? Why Bible studies and ministries to children and ministries to the poor? Why support missionaries and agencies and seminaries all over the world? Why everything? *Make disciples of all nations*. More and better of them. Quantity and quality. We'd better know why we are here and what we are to do. *Make disciples*. Everything else exists to fulfill that purpose.

The Mission and Bethel Church

Beware of mission rift and mission drift

Many a church has been torn asunder either by fighting about the mission of the church or the slow and gradual loss of vision for Jesus' mission. One is a rift. One is a drift. A rift is a fight for control. A drift is the loss of any fight or energy at all. Nobody really cares or they pursue something else.

Rifts are terrible firestorms typically resulting in church splits and new churches starting. You can see this in towns where you drive through and you see First Presbyterian Church, Second Presbyterian Church, Third Presbyterian Church. What happened? Group A wanted to do X. Group B thought the church should do Y. Group C thought the church should do more Z. The escalating argument about the mission didn't energize the church, it fractured it. Rifts are always a danger. I've gone through a few fissures myself over the years. We need to be of one mind, grounded in Scripture, that the mission of the church is *to make fully devoted followers of Jesus whose lives are all about Him*. There are a thousand different ways to get there, but there's only one mission. Let's keep it front and center. This is why we are here.

Historically a more real danger is mission drift. Mission drift is when an organization's vision and purpose slips. What once energized the people moves into the background. They slowly become more and more interested in their personal comfort, or secondary level issues move to the foreground. The church used to be vibrant and they were filling the baptism regularly. But now, nobody fights about the mission because they don't care enough to fight. But they will fight about less worthy things: the paint color on the wall, preference issues in worship, or any petty thing. The main thing is relegated to the background and a minor thing is pushed up to front and center. This is how churches die and many of them need to. They

have forsaken the mission and lost their way. When a church is drifting it indicates drifting. The vision was lost. The culture of the church has moved away from the prime directive.

Here's another indication; how do we react to change for mission purposes? How open are we if a case can be made that a change would make us more effective at making disciples? The mission mindset is, whatever it takes, it's not about me, it's all for him!

Healthy things change! I look at my daughters, especially my oldest (because I can actually talk in sentences to her) and I look at her and she's growing. She's going to preschool in the fall. I can't believe it. Sometimes I say to her "Baby girl, could you please stop growing? I like you just the way you are." And she says, "No, Daddy. I want to go to Disney and be a ballerina." Now is that unhealthy? Like what if she said, "Ok Daddy, I'm going to start taking drugs right now so that I never change one bit and don't grow at all." No, that's unhealthy, isn't it?

When we're committed to status quo at all costs, that is a sign of a terrible, spiritual disease. When we're healthy, we want to change and grow. And we love it when it happens. Let's avoid mission rift and mission drift.

We do what we do for the King

Jesus didn't say, *I have an amazing idea!* like *Shark Tank* where people try to convince investors their product has great potential. *I have a better vision. I have a better way to do this.* Jesus doesn't motivate us with his idea. The motivation of the church is Jesus himself. *All authority in heaven and earth is mine. Therefore go.* We do what we do because he is who he is. The motivation for the mission is a person. Jesus.

"We need a greater, more captivating motivation than "missional church." When the motivation for mission is mission, people revert to consumerism. However, if our missional endeavors are motivated by something greater, more certain, than our oscillating passion for the advance of the gospel, then there is hope."¹

It's not all about the mission. All about the Great Commission. All about the vision. No, *it's all about him.* The more glorious and beautiful we find Jesus to be (and he is all that and more), the more enduring our engagement in gospel ministry will be. We can't build an enduring church on a philosophy of ministry or unique way of doing church. Those come and go. The church is built on Jesus as the foundation and chief cornerstone. Our lives and engagement in ministry will show just how high or low we perceive Jesus to be. What would your life say?

I remember when my brother left to go do missions in South America. We were having our teary family goodbye. I could hardly talk but as I embraced him, I whispered in his ear, *For the King.* I told that story years ago at a camp in Georgia. They liked it so much that for years they have sold these in their store (next page):

¹ Jonathan Dodson, "Why the Missional Church Isn't Enough," www.thegospelcoalition.org, April 9, 2012.



It's for the king.

When Christ's mission is our goal, gospel success is our joy

Jesus told a parable that is both encouraging and indicting,

"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:8-10)

If there is any place that doesn't have mission drift or mission rift, it's heaven. They have priorities right in heaven. Jesus gives us a glimpse into what heaven celebrates, like a woman who lost a silver coin. That may not seem like a lot. We have jars full of loose change at home. But in this culture, those 10 silver coins may have been all she had. She loses one. That's 10% of her net worth. Does she look? Would you? In the course of time she finds it. She calls her friends together. *Rejoice with me, the valuable coin that was lost, is now found.* It's in a series of parables with this theme including the lost sheep and the prodigal son.

Verse 10 gives the heavenly glimpse, *"There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* Are there other things to think about in heaven? Much more than here on earth. Yet, heaven has its priorities right. It knows what is really valuable and exciting—a sinner who repents. Why would heaven care so much? There are 7 billion sinners on planet earth. Why is one repenting a heavenly party?

Because heaven understands God's mission better than we do. Heaven values what God values. A sinner repenting is the mission going forward. It's a win. If that is heaven's joy, then it should be ours as well.

You can tell your real priorities by what makes you the happiest. How about us being a church that gets really happy whenever there is a win for the gospel? Let's practice a second. What makes you happiest? The Bears win the North division... Your candidate wins the election... Your child is named to the honor roll... A sinner receives Christ as Savior.

We had an amazing story unfold this week in our church. One of our elders, Bob Kelleman, has a brother Steve. Steve's life was hard. Bob and his family faithfully loved him and prayed for him. One year ago, their daughter Maria gave her life to the Lord at Easter here at Bethel. She began to tell her story to her Uncle Steve. His health declined. They prayed and loved him. This Palm Sunday, April 9, here is what happened in Bob's words:

"When we returned to the hospital/rehab center, Steve called us to his bedside and said, 'You have to come close. I have something very important to tell you. I've fought, and fought, and fought against Christ. But I'm ready to surrender. Help me.' We then shared the gospel further: Christ's sinless life, his death on behalf of sinners, his resurrection, and our need to confess our sin and to receive Christ as our Savior. Steve said he was ready and he believed all of that. So, Steve and I prayed, phrase by phrase, a prayer of confession, repentance, and reception of Christ as Savior."

This picture was taken moments after he received Christ:



Steve died this week on Wednesday, 24 days after trusting in Christ. He's in heaven now. Like the thief on the cross, he was saved at the very end.

Make disciples, Bethel Church! More and better. *"And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* (Matthew 28:20)

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016).* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2017 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.