

THE GREAT CO-MISSION: THE GOSPEL IN STREET CLOTHES – A REFRAMING OF MATTHEW 18:18-20

Is “missions” a task or an outflow of our discipleship? What do we mean when we say that the church needs to join/partner in God’s mission? What is God’s mission? What do we mean when we say that there are two interconnected keys to the revitalization of the church? No, it’s not better programming, more inspirational preaching and worship services, modern and technologically equipped buildings nor is it specific training in hospitality, cross cultural competency or mapping out your neighbourhood. These are all good and necessary in their own right but they are not keys (principles); they are components, strategies and aids to growth and vitality.

A proper understanding of Matthew 18:18-20 can be a game changer for those wanting to grow the church the Jesus’ way. But it requires honesty, courage and a long obedience in the same direction.

The two keys that I have identified are principles. They can unlock the door to growth because these are what Jesus offered to us as his disciples.

Key 1: A renewed and biblically accurate understanding and application of Matthew 28: 18-20 (commonly known as the Great Commission but re-termed the Great Co-mission¹)

Key 2: A return to Christian leadership as it is described in the bible²

Key 1: The Great Co-mission

More than Ninety five percent of the body of Christ (i.e. the non-clergy) consider themselves under-equipped and unconfident when participating in Gods mission on earth. Much of this is due to the mis (or skewed) interpretation of what missions is and what is commonly referred to as the ‘Great Commission”, including the disproportionate and undue emphasis on elevating the function and status of specialists at the expense of the rest of the church. Our church (which comprises the ENTIRE body of Christ) needs to regain a correct and empowering interpretation of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples (and us by extension) before he ascended. If ALL of us as Christ followers lean into this mandate the way it was meant to be, we could witness a revival, revitalization and growth of our communities of faith. One of the biggest falsehoods probably unknowingly propagated in the church over the millennia is that church growth is the prerogative of a specialized few. We still operate under this misguided belief.

Matthew 28:18-20 is Jesus’ strategy for growing the church – **the Co-mission of the church. It was not a special instruction given to special people to undertake a special task. It was a**

¹ A new term which I hope replaces the previous, very narrow descriptor of the intent of this passage

² To be addressed in a separate article

common calling to ordinary believers to participate in the extra-ordinary mission of growing the church. It is our calling to be in co-mission with God.

Q - What is the need for this reframing?

A – Erroneous assumptions and incorrect beliefs lead to misguided practices and habits. The modern-day church has adopted and accommodated an incorrect understanding of the mandate in Matthew 28, which has led to an unhealthy and distorted version of what the church should be and do. As you read the argument for revisiting this passage and discovering its correct meaning, you will find that it changes the emphasis of ministry, mission responsibility and power dynamics in the congregation and re-focuses on church growth strategy. The Great Commission as the passage is commonly referred to is not primarily a mandate for world missions or evangelism. It is rather a mandate for church growth as will be explained later on.

The Great Co-mission

The Great Commission was a term coined in the 17th century and popularized by Hudson Taylor in the 19th century. Here's what I wrote in the Evangelical Missions Quarterly magazine some time ago, on this subject.

The “Logos” came and lived among us. What was supposed to be an organic, natural and incarnational movement became quickly encapsulated into a programmatic enterprise. The Great Commission which was given to ALL disciples became the prerogative of a specialized few. The “as you live and move about” of the Great Commission was interpreted as “go into the rest of the world” which birthed a (*western*) missionary movement that required people with specialized training, funding, institutional support and organizational infrastructure, for its growth. Fortunately, although the western mission's movement is still robust, it has moved beyond being a western enterprise to a networked global strategy. However, in its specialized format, it seems to have hijacked the original concept of the Great Commission which, in itself is problematic as a description of a specific mandate given by Jesus to all believers.

Built into the command in Matthew 28 is the concept of being incarnational. The “Go” in the Greek really means “as you are going” which in turn implies the idea that carrying out the work of “discipling” is done in one's normal and everyday spheres of living³.

Further, the concept of “making disciples” is one that is incorrectly read into the original Greek mandate to “disciple”. The sentence in the original Greek text has only one imperative verb – disciple. The other verbs such as “going”, “teaching” and “baptizing” are participles. This has enormous significance. Our imperative is not to “GO” as has been wrongly interpreted by contemporary theologians but rather, to “disciple”⁴. Further, the verb disciple is a second-

³ (Pullenayegem, 2019) - www.MissioNexus.org/emq

⁴ My thanks to Kenny Burchard for granting me permission to use some of his great work on unpacking this passage. Visit

person, plural imperative verb meaning that there is no noun attached to it. It simply says “disciple” as we would command someone to jump or run. In reality therefore, we cannot and are not called to “make” disciples – only the Holy Spirit can do that. We are called to *disciple* those who follow Jesus. It does change the way we approach evangelism as well, but that’s a subject for a later conversation.

In my opinion, Jesus gave us a very simple strategy for church growth. Why have we made it so complicated?

Here’s my paraphrase of Matthew 28: 18-20). This is what Jesus said. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me and I’m delegating that authority to you. Therefore, as you are going about (your daily) living, reproduce yourself in (disciple) others – take them from an encounter with me (Jesus), the one who gave you life, to the point where they could do the same with others. You do this by teaching them and modeling all that you’ve learned (from me) as my disciple. As they (these spiritual children) embrace their newfound faith, they will desire to be a part of an authentic community of faith. Baptize them into that community in the name of the Trinity. That way everyone will know what they believe in and whom they belong to. And as you do this, I promise to be with you every step of the way, until I come again, guiding, empowering and equipping you in your effort to obey my instructions”.*

If we follow this principle of discipling, the church will grow by multiplication and by conviction, rather than by addition and convention or worse still, dying by attrition. We will have a much more robust church made up of communities of faith that are not influenced by the style of worship nor the charisma and eloquence of the preacher but rather by their dependence on the Holy Spirit, a deep and solid faith in Jesus Christ which compels them to “pass it on” no matter where they are placed.

God is on mission in the world. He has gone ahead of us; he is the one renewing people’s hearts, reconciling all things to himself. And, he is inviting us into this mission and has given us a strategy to grow the fruit of that mission i.e. a way of building a movement we refer to as the church, the body of Christ.

Consequently, the task of proclaiming the gospel is one that every believer is invited into as an outcome of their commitment to follow Jesus. Missions as we now understand it is therefore not a task that we do but rather something that believers engage in as part of their everyday walk with Jesus.

So listen as God says – “as you go, look for opportunities and evidences of my transforming work in your world, disciple those whom I bring your way, teaching them to obey (again not just pass on knowledge but more in terms of training: similar to a horse being trained) the things I taught you...”.

And then there is a natural progression of those people we are discipling to want to belong to a new community – so baptize.

There's also the confusion around "all nations". Borrowing heavily from Kenny Burchard, here's how he describes the renewed understanding of the phrase.

"But what about that part about going into all the world? Surely this is really about GOING!" No. The Greek word for world is Kosmos, and the word for Earth is Ghays. But the word here in Matthew is neither of those two words. The word here is "Ethnay" which is typically translated "gentiles." So what is the idea? The idea is that these Jewish Christians were to disciple all of the people groups outside of their own ethnicity and share about Jesus with every kind of person in the world, and not just keep the good-news announcement to themselves like a new Jewish sect with Jesus as the leader.

The good news about Jesus is for "all ethnicities" or "every kind of human being in the world." This has nothing to do with travelling to foreign countries (though that is fine and was eventually done – and is still done today). This is about sharing Jesus with everyone even if (and especially if) they are not like you. That's all. And you can do that in your own hometown. No jet fuel, bus tickets, or fundraising is required. In fact, there are probably many "ethnay" (ethnic groups) in your town!"

The Great Co-mission in Matthew 28 is bookended by two solid assurances without which we really have no power or protection to carry out the mandate. The first is the assurance that our authority (and power) for doing so derives from Jesus. When he claimed that "All authority is given to me...", he was telling his disciples that whatever they were being asked to do was to be done with that same authority that was now being delegated to them.

The second is the assurance of the presence of Jesus at all times. "And (behold), I am with you until the end of the ages" is an assurance that we carry as we engage in this strategic work of building the kingdom. Without His presence and power, our efforts are hopeless and empty.

PROTECTION

PRESENCE

US (as we partner in the Missio-Dei)

POWER

PROVISION

The idea of Co-mission is that we get to partner with Jesus in his mission of building his church.

Growing the church is not our business: it is God's. Discipling people is our responsibility and is His strategy to grow the church.

When believers get disciplined in the ways of Jesus, they understand that discipleship is a holistic endeavour where missions is an outcome of their walk with Jesus.

What then is discipleship? It is how to live or be a “disciple” just as leadership is about being a leader. It is about learning to walk closely with God, learning to love and please God more each day and doing what God has laid on our hearts with the gifts and resources we have been given to use for this purpose. How do we learn to love God? By reading scripture, finding out what pleases God and what kinds of things, if obeyed, would make us more like Jesus. It means learning to talk with God in prayer and getting direction, seeking solace and becoming more intimate in our relationship. It means understanding the physical and social context in which we live and applying biblical principles to solve the world’s problems. It means investing our lives in people so that they too can become fruit bearing disciples of Jesus. It means being able to share our story of faith with others authentically and sincerely.

Jesus was the perfect example of holistic ministry. Matthew 9 describes a few days in the life of Jesus. He forgave and healed a paralyzed man, raised a girl from the dead, taught about the Sabbath, challenged someone to follow him (Matthew), healed a sick woman and men who were blind and mute. At the end of the chapter, here is what is written about Jesus. *“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd”*.

He taught, proclaimed, healed and had compassion – all in the person of one man. There were no two Jesus’s: one that healed and one that proclaimed. And that’s the same type of discipleship Jesus is inviting us into. Working for justice, loving mercy, bearing witness in word and deed should all be an integral part of every disciple’s lifestyle.

As an aside, do you know why the persecuted church grows so quickly⁵? It is because ordinary believers who have no other “supports” to lean on, learn how to depend solely on the Triune God for their lives and daily sustenance. Often prayer, bible reading and finding comfort and support in the presence of like-minded others become the only resources they have. It grows their faith in unbelievable ways – much faster and deeper than by listening to a thousand sermons seated in a comfortable church pew⁶. There are no preachers, no specialized Bible teachers but just the Holy Spirit, the written word of God and a committed community of believers.

Finally, one would think that last words are important. No one on their death bed talked passionately about trivia. These were Jesus’s last words before he left the earth. He found it important to give these final instructions to a group of bewildered and confused disciples as he ascended. He was giving them the principles for growing the movement – not by evangelism (although that is a part of it) but by discipling: by completing the cycle. We would indeed be foolish to dismiss the significance of the timing of these words.

⁵ A phenomenon that has occurred over millennia, not just speculation

⁶ I know this because I have been there many times and know of many others too.