



The Mission or Missions?

WHO YOU ARE WHEREVER YOU ARE!

Mission emphasis in the church invariably stresses Matthew 28:19, concentrating on becoming a missionary in a foreign land.¹ “Go and make disciples” is the challenge. From the Book of Acts, Paul’s example is used to illustrate missionaries courageously going to pagan lands and opening up new frontiers. The message customarily turns to the distinction between the “goers” and the “senders,” those who stay supporting and praying for those who “go.” The focus without exception is always placed on the little word “go.” Yet it is from this division between “goers” and “senders” that key questions emerge which must be answered. Is “going” a task in Matthew 28? Is the disparity valid between those who send and those who go? This article speaks to these issues.

Understanding “go and make disciples” in Matthew 28 as two commands is a valid translation of the text based on the words used.² Nevertheless, the book of Acts provides needed insight. Approximately two years after Christ’s death, a fact on which most scholars agree, the events in Acts 8:1 took place.³ “And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Notice that “all” left except the apostles. The timeframe regarding this verse in relation to the Matthew passage presents us with a dilemma relating to the usual view of “go and make disciples.” There are two possible scenarios: first, the apostles were disobedient for two years, remaining in Jerusalem, and did not “go” as Christ commanded or, second, they had a different understanding of His words and today we misapply the text. The historical background supports an alternative way of looking at the text and in fact provides a new and fresh perspective regarding missions.

The word forms used in Matthew 28:19 can legitimately be translated, “As you are going, make disciples.”⁴ Having observed Jesus for three and one-half years, the apostles must certainly have known that disciple-making involved a process in which men move from being merely curious followers, to actually becoming convinced, and finally committed. The total sequence is captured in the summary of Matthew 28:19-20, “As you are going, make disciples... baptizing them... and... teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” The Eleven had personally experienced this progression from being curious (John 1:35-40), to convinced (2:11), to committed (Matt. 4:18-20).⁵ They were aware that “going” to make disciples involved making known, in word and deed, the promise of eternal life through faith in Christ to the curious, followed by baptism being the outward expression of that internalized truth. The apostles observed inquisitive followers who came to see the miracles and hear His words, some of whom were persuaded and were baptized. While in the first century baptism was the first act of obedience after salvation, continuing to follow Christ’s teachings transformed the convinced follower into a committed disciple.

Likewise for us, “baptizing” (Matt. 28:19) and “teaching” (v. 20) are for the convinced who have placed faith in Christ for eternal life. What about those who are curious, questioning, still seeking? In our spheres of influence through our words and in our life we are to make Christ known that others might come to faith. Christ directed His command to “make disciples” not exclusively to the apostles or to those who go to a foreign land, but as well to you and me. All

Christians are responsible for “the mission” and are involved in “missions,” no matter their actual location. It is not where you are, but *who you are where you are*.

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“As we are going” in our daily lives, in our workplace, in our neighborhood, or in our school, all believers are to be involved in the process of “making disciples,” followers of Jesus Christ. The only variable is how well we carry out our assignment. Are we harming the cause of Christ by our words and actions or enhancing it? “The mission” and “missions” is inexplicably linked.

The ingrained distinction between the “goers” and the “senders” harms both “missions” and “the mission.” Unfortunately it is assumed by most in the church today that missionaries in foreign lands or in local parachurch organizations hold the responsibility for carrying out Christ’s words in Matthew 28. This unbiblical perspective instills a passive attitude toward missions, often with a sense of insignificance if not guilt. With a distorted focus on “go,” those who remain are often left with feeling that they have a diminished role to play in the fulfillment of Christ’s command.

Reorientation Required

Please do not miss the point; this discussion is not advocating that we should not support “missionaries,” foreign or domestic. The point is that the church needs to grasp the concept that *all* Christians are “missionaries,” not just the few who “go.” All believers are “goers.” “As we are going” occurs wherever God has placed us, in our own personal mission field. This emphasis within the church requires a paradigm shift, a change from one way of thinking to another, especially by the leadership.

Openness to different ideas, how attitudes are developed and expressed, and the way decisions are made determine an organization’s culture. You are cognizant of the *way* things are done in your workplace, as well as in your church. For a culture to change, for a paradigm shift to occur, leaders must be open, willing, and unafraid to evaluate *what* they are doing, particularly *why* and *how*. Intention plays out in implementation. In the church, the leadership’s approach to the ministry is evident in what is emphasized and in the way things are done. What is communicated about missions should be reevaluated and aligned with the biblical perspective.

Changing Culture

A change in a church’s attitude toward missions isn’t a quick fix with an announcement that all are now “missionaries.” It requires not only a change in thinking, but a change in action as well. It isn’t to institute evangelism programs, forcing members outside their natural spheres of influence with hit-and-run approaches to sharing their faith. It isn’t to continually perpetuate a bring-them-to-church mentality so their pagan friends can hear the gospel. Rather, cultural change requires a more extensive and long-lasting approach; one that builds an environment in which making disciples is a way of life.⁶

Change requires a real distinction between the church gathered and the church scattered. To become effective “missionaries” when the church is scattered, the emphasis of the gathered church must center on the proper functioning of the body through mutual, one-to-another ministries using individual spiritual giftedness (Eph. 4:15-16). This doesn’t occur simply by *attending* church and listening to a sermon, the one-to-all-the-others ministry. While that may be valuable instructional time, it is imperative that intimate fellowship be the pattern within church gatherings. More than a coffee-and-donut time between services or a pause in the service to-turn-and-greet-those-around-you, intimate fellowship requires smaller groupings of believers with the leadership functioning in a shepherd-teacher role (vv. 11-12).⁷ Only then will those within the body realize the biblical reality of fellowship with other believers. At salvation each of us experiences personally the work of God and we are enthusiastic to share our newfound faith with unbelievers. But for most believers in the church, that initial flame for Christ has become merely a flicker. Why? Because the “working out our salvation,” living out the Christian life as committed disciples, is accomplished corporately through the proper functioning body of Christ.

The dynamic of the first-century church was their shared concern, support, and service for each another. They *experienced* church. They came together to minister to one another through

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meaningful relationships and interaction, experiencing intimate fellowship. This is the pattern of Acts 2:42-47 and Hebrews 10:24-25. And the result was that the church was “having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:47). If this is not the visible pattern, the church becomes nothing more than a book club or social club, having no impact for Christ.

Believers will naturally, spontaneously share their faith in Christ *only* when their faith is a reality. Since Christians cannot effectively share what they do not possess, it is imperative that the church cultivate an environment in which believers are encouraged and supported as they live out the truth of God’s Word. To say it another way, the body when gathered is the key to affecting the world for Christ “as we are going” in our individual lives.

“As you are going” is the mission mind-set. Every Christian is to be engaged and each bears the responsibility of a “missionary.” Only by fostering an atmosphere that embraces and reinforces the obligation that every believer is to be engaged in “the mission” and by creating an environment for intimate fellowship within the gathered church, will the world be impacted, both here and abroad, in “the mission” of disciple-making.



Endnotes

1. The Bible does not use the word “missionary.” Nevertheless it a word pregnant in meaning, used primarily when addressing those sent by the church to spread the gospel.
2. Ken Neff, *Rethinking the Task* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 2002), p. 8.
The circumstantial participle (“go”) is equivalent to the action of the infinite verb (“make disciples”). Both are understood as commands.
3. W. Graham Scroggie, *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), pp. 175, 183; H. Wayne House, *Chronological and Background Charts of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 127.
4. Neff, *Rethinking the Task*, p. 8.
The circumstantial participles (“going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching”) express the manner in which the action of the infinite verb (“make disciples”) is accomplished.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Design for Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), pp. 13-21.
6. For further information see Neil Hudson, *Imagine Church* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2012).
7. For further information see John Moore and Ken Neff, *A New Testament Blueprint for the Church* (St. Augustine, FL: LeaderQuest, 1985).