

2013/2: Go And Teach (Matthew 28:18-20)

by BS Poh

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The topic assigned for me to speak on is "Go, And Teach", taken from Matthew 28:18-20. This passage of Scripture contains the command of the Lord commonly known as the Great Commission. The Great Commission is a command directed to the local church, to plant other local churches. We arrive at this conclusion from five considerations.

The context

The first consideration is the context of the passage. The Lord Jesus has risen from the dead. He meets the eleven disciples in Galilee. (Judas is already dead.) He declares His authority, given to Him by God the Father. The command is given, which is the fullest account of the Great Commission. Any command given to the apostles is meant for the local churches, unless it can be shown from the context that the command is meant only for the apostles. An example is Matthew 18:15-17, concerning how to deal with a personal offences. You are to tell your brother his sins against you. If he refuses to listen, take witnesses along to talk to him. If he still refuses to listen, tell it to the church. But where was the church at that time? Churches were founded later. Clearly, the Lord intended the instruction on the handling of personal offences to be taught to the churches that were planted later.

Furthermore, the Great commission requires the making disciples of all the nations - a task which the apostles could not cover in their lifetime. The Great Commission ends with the words, "... and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." The apostles did not live to the end of the age. Clearly, the Lord intends this command to be given to the churches in all ages, until He comes back to judge the world.

The Great Commission includes the ordinance of baptism, which is one of two ordinances given to the local church. The other ordinance is the Lord's Supper. The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11:23, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you ..." The instruction on the Lord's Supper was given to the apostle Paul to be delivered to the local churches. Surely, the ordinance of baptism is meant for the local church as well.

It is clear from the context that the Great Commission is a command given to the local church. It is not meant for the individual, or for any Christian organization other than the local church.

The scope

The second consideration is the scope of the Great Commission. We are required to make disciples "of all the nations." This is primarily a reference to ethnic groups, and not to political entities, or countries. Of course, we often find a certain ethnic group concentrated in a particular country, or

one ethnic group scattered in many countries. The point we are making is that we must not be misled by the modern usage of the word "nations," which is synonymous with "countries."

The original Greek for "the nations" is *ta ethne*, from which we get the English word "ethnic" and the Indonesian word "etnis". In Acts 2:5, we read of devout men who came "from every nation under heaven." Here, the reference is to the Jews and proselytes who came from the regions around Judea and who spoke languages other than Hebrew. On other occasions, "the nations" is translated as "Gentiles," that is, people other than the Jews. In Acts 13:46, for example, we read of Paul and Barnabas saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles." The Jews rejected the gospel, so Paul and Barnabas turned to the Gentiles, or "the nations."

To reach "all the nations" would require traveling to other places. As noted already, we may find various ethnic groups in one location, in which case the traveling would not be so extensive. The thrust of the Great Commission, however, is that other peoples elsewhere must be reached with the gospel. That is why the Great Commission, as recorded by Mark, reads, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." And it is recorded in Acts 1:8 as, "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Christians throughout the ages have understood this point. David Livingston traveled all over Africa to reach the various nations. William Carey crossed the seas to reach the peoples of India, and translated the Bible into more than thirty languages. Surely, we can see that it would have been impractical to bring all the converts back to the mother church from which the missionary came. The Lord did not intend the converts from all over the world to be brought to the mother church in Jerusalem!

If that is the case, what are we to do with the new converts? Surely, we cannot let them float about aimlessly without a local church to attach to. The converts should be gathered into local churches. The very scope of the Great Commission requires the planting of local churches.

The three elements

Thirdly, we consider the three elements found in the Great Commission - "going," "baptizing" and "teaching." The first element involves going into the world. We are not to wait for hearers to stream into the church to hear the gospel. A few odd individuals may be moved by God in His own mysterious ways to come to church. That would be the exception rather than the rule. The rule is that believers are to go to the people outside the church and invite them to come in to hear, or, better still, to bring the gospel to them. That is the first element of the Great Commission, which defines how the task is to be carried out. It is not the only element, and it must not be separated from other elements.

Many sincere and zealous Christians notice only the first element, which is to go into the world to make disciples. They would go witnessing to other people and feel happy when the hearers profess belief. Many of those who profess belief often turn out to be unconverted--they are not true disciples of Christ. A mere profession of faith does not constitute true conversion. And even if these Christians are careful to ensure that the hearers are genuinely converted, nothing more is done other than teaching the new converts to keep private devotion. The Great Commission, however, requires that the new disciples be baptized, which means incorporating them into the membership of the local church. In a pioneering situation, the new disciples would have to covenant together to become a new local church so that subsequent believers may be incorporated into it, through baptism.

The third element of the Great Commission is to teach the new disciples to observe all things commanded by the Lord. They are not to be taught only the elementary things of the faith, but "all

the things commanded," which would mean the teaching of the whole Bible. This can be done only in the context of the local church. The new converts have to be given systematic teaching and pastoral care. They have to "grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ," which is a gradual process. This can occur well only in the atmosphere of a spiritual family, which is the local church.

Apostolic examples

Fourthly, we must consider the apostolic examples. This is probably the best way to be convinced that we have understood the Great Commission correctly.

The apostle Paul was sent out with Barnabas by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3). They went around making disciples and gathering them into local churches. In Acts 14:23, we are told specifically that they "appointed elders in every church." To the apostles, a local church was not a loose gathering of believers, but believers who were properly constituted, and, ideally, had elders ruling over them. We know that Paul continued to do the same thing in the subsequent missionary journeys. We read of him meeting with the elders of the church in Ephesus, in Acts 20, which was planted earlier, in his second journey.

Not only were Paul and his colleagues doing this, the other apostles who were based in Jerusalem were also planting churches. In 1 Corinthians 9:5 we read these words, "Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?" Here, Paul was defending his apostleship. We are able to glean from his words the practice of the early churches--the churches had been sending out men, accompanied by their wives, to plant churches! Just as the apostle Paul had been traveling around to plant churches, so had the other men who were based in Jerusalem.

This is confirmed by Acts 9:31-32, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied. Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda." Two things are clear. First, many churches were already established throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria by that time. Second, Peter, and other men, were in the habit of traveling to plant new churches and to strengthen the existing ones.

The early churches

Fifthly, we consider the examples of the early churches. From our previous point, you might get the impression that only the apostles, and the churches with which they were associated, engaged in church planting. This is not the case, however, for the apostles appeared to have taught each of the churches to be involved in church planting as well. This might sound preposterous to many, but we can easily prove the point. First, we look at 1 Corinthians 1:2, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." Who are the "all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord"? This is often interpreted to mean "all believers throughout the world." The letter of Paul to the Corinthians is then taken to be one that was addressed to all believers everywhere. While this may be a legitimate application of the verse, it is unlikely that it was the original intention of the apostle.

Like the other books of the Bible, this epistle arose from a certain historical setting. Paul was addressing the various problems faced by the Corinthian church - such as sectarianism, immorality, the eating of food offered to idols, and others. It is known that churches in a region were in the practice of sharing the letters of the apostles. We know that the churches in Asia did this, for we

read in Colossians 4:16, these words, "Now when this epistle is read among you, see that it is read also in the church of Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea." It would appear that Paul was doing just that when he wrote to the Corinthian Christians. He wanted the letter to be read by other believers in the region of Achaia. This is spelt out explicitly in his second letter. We read in 2 Corinthians 1:1, "To the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia."

This shows that the church in Corinth was in touch with groups of scattered believers in the region of Achaia. These were probably believers who gathered regularly to worship and pray. The church in Corinth would have been exercising pastoral oversight over these scattered groups, until such time as they would become viable churches. Preachers would have visited them regularly to preach, exhort, or at the very least, to read to them the apostle's letters.

We consider another example. Acts 9:32 says, "Now it came to pass, as Peter went through all parts of the country, that he also came down to the saints who dwelt in Lydda." A few verses on, we find these words, in verse 38, "And since Lydda was near Joppa, and the disciples had heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, imploring him not to delay in coming to them." The two congregations, in Lydda and Joppa, were in contact with each other. We are told earlier, in verse 31, "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied." The churches are referred to according to regional groupings. In Galatians 1:2 we read of "the churches in Galatia," and in Revelation 1:4 we read of "the seven churches which are in Asia".

When we piece all this information together, the picture that emerges is that of an extremely dynamic, and yet organized, situation - in which each church had its satellite works in the surrounding region, preachers were being sent out to minister to these groups until they became viable churches, and these continued in fellowship with one another as regional groupings of churches. The New Testament churches were truly active and more mission-minded than is commonly realized! Like an organized army - a nest of ants, or a hive of bees - each was busily engaged in planting churches!

The early church understood the Great Commission as a command to the local church, to plant local churches.

Conclusion

We must draw some conclusions. Firstly, we must be mission-minded. This requires a readiness to go, a resoluteness to preach the gospel only, and a perseverance in the work until disciples are made.

Secondly, we must recognize the centrality of the local church in God's purpose. This requires the founding of churches by gathering together believers who are baptized. This requires clarity on the nature and characteristics of biblical churches. This also requires the reformation of existing churches so as to conform to the teaching of Scripture.

Thirdly, we must acknowledge the primacy of God's word in the church. This requires building up the faith of all the members, training them to be involved in building up the church, and equipping those who are called to full-time ministry with a thorough knowledge of the Bible.

May God help us in the glorious work of carrying out the Great Commission!

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