

Food For Thought Article: “The Dynamics of Discipleship (Part 2) ~ ‘Go’, ‘Make’, and ‘Teach’ - Mt. 28:16-20

In part 1 of this article on “The Dynamics of Discipleship”, we saw how important it is to begin by coming to Jesus together, receiving his gift of rest together, taking his yoke upon us together, and learning from him together (Mt. 11:28-30). Discipleship, therefore, is primarily a corporate activity; something we do together rather than separately.

Once we have obeyed Jesus in this regard, we are then ready to receive his next set of instructions which complement what he has already said to us. Instead of ‘Come’ he now says, ‘Go.’ Instead of ‘Take’ he now says ‘Make.’ And instead of ‘Learn’ he now says ‘Teach.’ His promise is then ‘I will be with you (plural) always, to the very end of the age.’ (Mt. 28:16-20)

However, before we get to this ‘Great Commission,’ it is instructive, I believe, to look at the whole of Matthew chapter 28 and to ask two questions, firstly, ‘What is a missionary like?’ and secondly, ‘What is the role of women in mission?’

1. What is a missionary like?

When you think of a missionary, particularly a cross-cultural missionary who leaves the relative comfort and familiarity of their home setting to venture out into the unknown, what do you imagine such a person to be like? Do you think of them as an outgoing charismatic individual, full of faith and the Spirit, a spiritual giant, good at languages and someone whose prayers and worship are on an altogether different plane from yours?

Not so for the disciples in this passage! Their underlying emotion was fear. And although some worshipped Jesus, some doubted ~ influenced, as they were, by the conspiracy theory that was circulating about Jesus’ body having been stolen by his disciples in the night. A considerable sum of money, acting as a bribe, had even changed hands to keep this ‘fake news’ alive (vs. 11-15).

Add to this a ‘violent earthquake’ and the appearance of a strong, dazzling white angel, and you can see why even the hardened, male, Roman guards were so afraid that ‘they shook and became like dead men’ (vs. 4).

It's strange, isn't it, how, as Christian disciples and missionaries, we can be a mixture of faith and fear; of doubt and worship; of joy and confusion; of assurance and perplexity. However, this also, it seems to me, is part of the dynamics of discipleship and doesn't at all discount us from Jesus' call to mission.

2. What is the role of women in mission?

Women have always had a key role to play in the proclamation of the gospel and the mission of the worldwide Church. Here in Matthew chapter 28, it was the two women (Mary Magdalene, and the other Mary i.e. the mother of James) who are mentioned, whilst Luke in his gospel, also mentions Joanna and the 'others' who presumably comprised a group of women (Lk.24:10). All of these were commissioned by the angel to go and tell the rest about Jesus' resurrection.

The verb to 'tell' in Mt. 28 verse 7 is 'eipate', but then the verb changes in verse 8 to 'apaggeilai' meaning to 'announce' or to 'preach'. And then Jesus himself commissions the women to 'announce' ('apaggeilate') to the male disciples that they should go to Galilee where they would see him (verse 10).

How important it is then, that women are given the opportunity to announce/preach the Good News and that men listen out for what God may be saying to them through their wives/sisters in the congregation etc.

Men can be so slow to believe; indeed, when they first heard from the women that Jesus was alive, they thought it was nonsense, an old wives' tale! (Lk. 24:11) I am reminded of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, who said: "All my best men.... are women!"

And of course, the Bible is full of women who were mightily used by God whose names we are familiar with. But I particularly like the contribution of an unnamed Jewish servant girl who had been taken hostage by a raiding party from Syria and found herself serving the wife of the commander of the Syrian Army. He was called Naaman. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

The unnamed servant girl said to Naaman's wife: "There is a prophet called Elisha, back in Israel, who could cure Naaman's leprosy. If only Naaman would go and see him, he would be healed."

And so it was, that Naaman was healed. But it was the unnamed Jewish servant girl who set the whole thing in motion! (See 2 Kings 5:1-14) Hence, we should never underestimate how God can use us, insignificant as we may think we are.

In the growth and spread of the Church in the book of Acts, a woman called Lydia was a prime mover. One Sabbath day, she and some other women got talking to four men, Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke, outside the city gate of Philippi, by the river where they used to meet to pray. Lydia was a woman of influence. She was a dealer in luxury purple cloth.

She was a worshipper of God and the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. She was a householder who provided hospitality for Paul and his friends and she and all the members of her household were baptised.

It was her reputation and influence in the community that provided Paul with social credibility and her home became a base for outreach in Phillipi which was the leading city in the district of Macedonia at that time.

What more could we say about women involved in mission? Ira Scudder (1870-1960) was an American lady who set up a medical college for Indian women in Vellore. Mary Slessor went to Nigeria in 1876 as a missionary ~ not the normal thing for a single, Victorian lady to do! Elisabeth Elliot spent two years working among the Auca people of eastern Ecuador after they had murdered her husband.

Annie Funk, another American, went to Chhatisgarh in India from 1906-1912. She died on the Titanic in 1912 as she sailed back to see her infirm mother. Amy Carmichael (1867-1951) who lived in India for 55 years and set up mission stations and orphanages in Bangalore and Dohnavur. (Google 'Female Christian Missionaries' if you want to see many more examples).

And of course, we must remember that men also are allowed to preach and teach and be missionaries! We should not forget the role of these male disciples that Jesus is addressing here ~ Thomas, who went to South India, Bartholomew to Armenia, Mark to Egypt. Moreover Peter, at some point, seems to have travelled East to plant the church in Babylon, present day Iraq. (See 1 Peter 5:13).

The Authority of Jesus

However, we can only go out in mission if we are convinced that all authority is given to Jesus (not only in heaven but also on earth) and that he gives his authority to us.

As we look out on the world, it may appear that all authority is in the hands of the political leaders, the rich, the newspaper barons, the celebrities, the technocrats etc. But this is not true ~ ultimate authority rests in the hands of Jesus. And it is only when we are sure about this that the missionary task of the Church becomes a realistic possibility. We go with the authority of Jesus.

Make Disciples, not just Converts!

Here in the West, we live in a culture where things must be quick and easy ~ e.g., instant coffee, instant mashed potato, ready meals.

But making disciples ('matheteusate') and teaching them ('didaskontes') requires dedicated, ongoing instruction and training.

This involves the use of our minds. It seems to me that there is a lot of spirituality around today which is empty-headed. Paul, however, says that we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rms. 12:2). Only then can we discover what the will of God is for us. There is no spiritual renewal without mental renewal. Thankfully, mature believers have the mind of Christ and his wisdom.

Jesus has chosen us to 'go' and to 'bear fruit – fruit that will last' (John 15:16). Transient conversions do little to build up the Church; producing mature believers takes time and commitment.

Make Disciples of All Nations not just Some Nations!

Recently, I spent a day with a guy who is a systems architect and who, together with a small team of software developers and graphic designers, is creating tailor-made apps and websites which will serve as platforms to share Christian media that engages with specific people groups, especially those who are unreached with the Gospel.

Currently they have over 200 eBooks and resources in the digital library with 38 different languages represented and new material is being added. You are reading this article courtesy of their work! (See info.media@om.org; library.mediaworks.global).

This is just one example of modern cross-cultural mission in action! Digital media is reaching out to all nations! And of course, because most nations are now multi-ethnic, this means that cross-cultural mission can be undertaken without leaving our own shores!

Worldwide international mission is, according to Jesus, an ongoing imperative. Little wonder then that the resurrected Jesus sends his disciples back to 'Galilee of the nations' to meet him there. (Mt. 4:15; 28:16)

The reasons we need to focus on all nations in our missionary vision are as follows: --

- The universality of God's purposes. Right from the beginning God said to Abraham, 'I have made you a father of many **nations**' (Gen. 17:5) and to his wife Sarah, God promised, 'she will be the mother of **nations**' (Gen.17:16).

John, in his gospel, has a very expansive view of God's purposes which embrace the '**world**' ('kosmos'). 'The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the **world**. He was in the **world**, and though the **world** was made through him, the **world** did not recognise him..... For God so loved the **world** that he gave his one and only Son..... For God did not send his Son into the **world** to condemn the **world**, but to save the **world** through him.' (Jn. 1:9&10; 3:16&17)

- The universality of God's creation. 'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.' (Gen. 1:1) 'Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.' (Is. 65:17) 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.' (Ps. 24:1) The whole of creation belongs to God and one day he will renew it. 'The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.' (Rms. 8:21)
- The universality of sin. Everywhere we look in the world we see nations ravaged by violence, fraud, immorality, self-indulgent luxury, the lure of alcohol, drugs, pornography etc. In a word, idolatry. 'There is no-one righteous, not even one.' (Rms. 3:10)
- The universality of God's Judgement. God said to Habakkuk: 'Look at the **nations** and watch.... I am raising up the Babylonians' (as my instrument of judgement.) See Hab. 1:5-7.

A myopic, introspective view of what God may be doing in us and around us may blind us to the reality of what God is doing in, through and among the nations of the world.

- The universality of opposition, persecution, and martyrdom. Part of our calling as disciples is to pray for and support those brothers and sisters in Christ who are being persecuted for their faith around the globe. We are called to identify with them in their suffering (Heb. 13:3).

According to 'Open Doors' (www.opendoorsuk.org), the top 15 countries where opposition is greatest are, from numbers 1-15: North Korea, Somalia, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Maldives, and Algeria.

In Nigeria, Pastor Zachariah's home was burned down last year and his wife and children died in the fire which was started by Fulani militants.

- The universality of worship. First, on earth: ‘For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.’ (Hab. 2:14) And in heaven: ‘There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and the Lamb.’ (Rev. 7:9)

Perhaps we see a foretaste of this already happening on earth. On Wednesday October 5th 2023 (just 2 days before the Hamas attack on Israel which ignited the war), the ‘March of the Nations’ took place in Jerusalem. It is organised every year by the International Christian Embassy as part of the Feast of Tabernacles Celebration. Tens of thousands of Israelis and Christians from all over the world took part in the parade. Marchers came from Europe, Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Middle East. Raphael Pimenta came from Brazil; Rose Zschornack from the Philippines; Zone Ho from Taiwan etc.

I am reminded of this from Zechariah 14:16: “Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles.”

- The universality of God’s desire that all should be saved.

Paul urges that petitions, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving be made for **all** people. ‘God our Saviour... wants **all** people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for **all** people. (See 1 Tim. 2:1-6)

We do not, however, believe that this universal perspective equates to ‘universalism’ i.e., the view that everyone without exception will ultimately be saved. Sadly, it remains true that not everyone is willing to repent of their sins, believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. There are, always have been and always will be, those who reject the Lord. Rather than believe the truth, some delight in wickedness (2 Thess. 2:12). Rather than come to the light, some prefer darkness (Jn. 3:19&20).

These then are the reasons why we need to have a global perspective as part of our missionary vision and why Jesus says ‘Go’ to all nations. Indeed, this age will not end, and Jesus will not return, until the gospel of the kingdom has been ‘preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations.’ (Mt.24:14)

Having gone to all nations, our call is then to disciple all nations and this involves two things:

1. Baptising them ('baptizontes' – plural, present active tense) and
2. Teaching them ('didaskontes' – also plural, present active tense)

Baptising them

Baptism is in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian confession is important as it guards against our having an unbalanced emphasis on just one person of the Godhead.

Pentecostals can exalt the Holy Spirit over the Father and the Son; Conservative evangelicals can emphasise the Son over the other two members of the Trinity; and some High Churches are strong on a rather formal relationship with the transcendent Father but weaker on the warm intimacy of our relationship with Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Our baptismal confession encourages us to worship, love and serve all three persons of the Trinity.

Baptism is an important covenantal sign. Firstly, it signifies a washing away of sin and a dying to sin. Hence it is both a bath and a burial.

I was once involved in designing a new church building and I suggested that the baptistery should be coffin-shaped to retain the symbolism of dying to sin! Others were not so keen!

Secondly, baptism signifies rising to new resurrection life in, and with, Christ. (See Rms. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12) Thirdly, it signifies our unity and equality in Christ. 'For we were all baptised by/in/with one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and were all given the one Spirit to drink.' (1 Cor. 12:13)

In countries where there is opposition to Christianity, it is a huge decision when a convert decides to be baptised. It is when they are baptised that they are likely to be ostracised by their family and face much more outright persecution.

Teaching them

I believe that the main reason for teaching disciples is to strengthen their faith. And what are we to teach? Jesus says, 'everything I have commanded you' ~ quite a task!

One of the key verbs used in the book of Acts – indeed it only occurs in Acts - is the verb **‘to strengthen’** (‘episterizo’). It means ‘to prop up’ or ‘support.’ A bit like supporting your roses or runner beans in your garden to stop them keeling over!

One of the things that Paul and Barnabas did on a regular basis was to return to the places and churches where there were new believers, in order to strengthen the faith of the disciples and encourage them to persevere. For example, ‘Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, **strengthening** the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith.’ (Acts 14:21&22)

Similarly, Paul and Silas ‘went through Syria and Cilicia, **strengthening** the churches’ (Acts 15:40&41), and Paul, on his own, ‘travelled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, **strengthening** all the disciples.’ (Acts 18:23)

So, we are left with two questions:

- 1. ‘Does the teaching in the Church I attend strengthen my faith?’**
- 2. ‘Am I being taught about the importance of worldwide mission?’**

Some years ago, a friend of mine was visiting a town in mid Wales called Rhayader and noticed a group of people from south Korea, in the open air, telling people about Jesus. He went over to speak to them and they told him that a missionary called Robert Thomas, who was born in Rhayader, had gone over to Korea in the 19th century and it was because of his witness that their church had been planted. Robert Thomas was, in fact, the first Protestant martyr in Korea.

And these south Koreans had wanted to return to the Welsh town to give thanks and to strengthen the faith of those who lived there today! They had been well taught!

The Importance of ‘And.’

Sometimes, as disciples, I think we are full of ‘buts’ rather than ‘ands’! In terms of mission, God is the God of the ‘and’!

Jesus says: ‘All authority in heaven **and** on earth is given to me;’ ‘go **and** make disciples of all nations;’ baptise them ‘in the name of the Father **and** of the Son **and** of the Holy Spirit, **and** teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you;’ ‘**And** surely, I am with you always.’ (Mt. 28:18-20)

The word ‘and’ is key in mission. It occurs again in the context of receiving the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:8. ‘You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; **and** you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, **and** in all Judea **and** Samaria, **and** to the ends of the earth.’

So ‘and’ is an expansive and all-inclusive word which teaches us that mission to all nations is central to the gospel message.

Conclusion.

As we saw in Part 1 of this article, Jesus wants us to ‘Come’ to him, ‘Take’ his yoke upon us and ‘Learn’ from him (Mt. 11:28-30), before calling us to ‘Go’ to all nations, ‘Make’ disciples of all nations and ‘Teach’ them all he has commanded us. (Mt. 28:18-20)

To magnify the dynamic nature of discipleship, I have written my own paraphrase of Mt. 11:28&29 and Mt. 28:18b-20 emphasising the tenses and immediacy of the verbs. Jesus said: “Now, all of you disciples, come to me. Keep taking my yoke on you and I will keep giving you rest. Retain and put into practice what you learn from me and you will keep on finding rest for your souls.” (Mt. 11:28&29 - GI Paraphrase)

“As Jesus was coming towards them, he said, ‘Because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given, once and for all, to me ~ be going therefore, making disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them continuously all the instructions I have given you; and see, I will be with you all, every day, wherever I send you, until the completion of this age.’” (Mt. 28:18b-20 – GI Paraphrase)

And so, Matthew brings his gospel full circle. As the birth of Jesus approached, in Mt. 1:23, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means ‘God with us’).” And here (Mt. 28:20) his last words are the words of Emmanuel/Jesus/God with us, promising his presence until the ‘very end of the age.’ Only then will this global missionary mandate be complete.

George Irving – Mar. 2024

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