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## **Discipleship as Mission: A Missing Dimension in Contemporary Discussion on Matthew 28: 18-20.**

*Allan McNicol*

### **The Vision of World Mission**

Christianity professes to be a universal religion. It claims to have a message for all men. From its first century it has had imbedded in its revered original document a commission to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them . . . , teaching them to observe all things" which its founder had commanded. It has been a missionary religion. While the majority of its adherents have not thought in terms of all mankind, in theory its leaders have often claimed to do so, and from time to time individuals and minorities have dreamed in world-wide terms and have endeavored to make their dreams effective. If the record of Christianity is to be true to the genius of that faith and is to be correctly appraised, in every period it must be seen against the background of all the globe.<sup>1</sup>

It is now almost fifty years since these words were written by Kenneth Scott Latourette. As the renowned historian and professor of Christian missions at Yale University, Latourette was an indefatigable optimist. The whole burden of his career was to hammer home a claim that was controversial then and is even more arguable today. For Latourette, despite the growth of secularism in the West with its attendant erosion on the impact of the Christian faith, it has only been in the modern era that Christianity has truly become a global religion. Thus the golden era of Christianity was not the first, fourth, or sixteenth, but the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is in the modern era that the Christian message has made its greatest gains.

This thesis was at the center of Latourette's seven volume magnum opus, A History of the Expansion of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In this massive project Latourette took three volumes to trace the history of the expansion of Christianity until 1800. He took another four volumes to narrate the next one hundred and fifty years.

He was aware that the triumph of Christianity in the last days of the Roman Empire was an event of monumental significance for Western culture; but Latourette loved to point out that while this was going on Christianity hardly made any inroads into the great Persian, Indian, or Chinese civilizations that could rival Rome at the zenith of its power.<sup>3</sup>

As for what was going on in the rest of the world, during the Middle Ages, Western Europe (the bastion of Christianity), was of second-level importance on the global scene; and even during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries the impact of Christendom on the traditional high civilizations of Asia, Africa, and the Americas was minimal compared to that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup>

During my student days at Yale I lived in the small housing complex where Latourette resided and had his office. Then an old man in the twilight of his career, he still kept a rigorous schedule. As an integral part of his regimen every evening he would go for a long walk, slowly and resolutely following a predetermined course around the streets of New Haven until he eventually would arrive home. I have often thought that this slow but deliberate gait of the aged man as he moved toward his set goal was symbolic of Latourette's view of the growth of the Church; for almost imperceptibly Christianity emerged out of its humble origins in the Eastern Mediterranean, ever growing, until finally in the modern era it spans the globe. Only in our time is the gospel being preached in all the world. Thus, despite the emergence in our century of such hostile ideologies to the Faith as National Socialism, Communism, and now, more subtly, the secular liberal Western democracies, as we come toward the beginning of the third millennium, Christianity has never been so significant on the global scene.

Nevertheless, as we indicated at the outset, the Latourette thesis is arguable. How can it be that the persistent growth of the gospel of the Prince of Peace marches hand in hand with a world that appears to be more violent and dangerous? Christianity, in its various forms, has brought untold benefits for the poor and down-trodden. Yet it also shelters under its canopy those who would plant car bombs in urban centers and others who practice the most virulent forms of racism. Has the globalization of Christendom produced so many inner contradictions that it is in danger of collapsing from within? Is the global movement of Christendom not much more than the triumph of Western culture and technology? Among the more than one billion people who are listed in the almanacs as Christian, how many are truly believers?

Many of these paradoxes that exist in Christendom also surface in the fellowship of the churches of Christ. As we stand at the threshold of the nineties there is a gradual realization growing among us that with churches in over a hundred different countries, and with strong indigenous works on the various major continents, we have become a world-wide fellowship! But, on the other hand, in the areas of our traditional strength in North America, there are widespread theological differences over foundational issues for our heritage such as the role of Restorationism, the interpretation of Scripture, and the function of worship. This has led in some quarters to demoralization. And this is indicated by the fact that considerable problems are now encountered among families in being able to pass on the Restoration heritage to the next generation. Thus churches of Christ face the real prospect of internal disintegration as a result of theological incoherence. This situation has emerged at the precise time that their message and witness has become global.

With these very dangerous cross-currents operating both within the wider ecumenical community and the world-wide fellowship of churches of Christ it is important to clarify our thinking with reference to a fundamental question — what do we understand to be the mission of the church?

## A Perceived Ambiguity

Appropriately enough this brings us to the programmatic words of Matthew 28:18-20, sometimes called the Great Commission.<sup>5</sup> Here, at the end of a foundational document of the church, the eleven disciples encounter the risen Lord and are told to make disciples among the peoples<sup>6</sup> and teach the converts to observe all things. Here worldwide mission ("make disciples in the nations") and lifestyle ("observe all things") are closely linked together.<sup>7</sup>

As straightforward as the teaching of Matthew 28:18-20 appears to be, in the history of Christianity, a basic ambiguity has plagued interpretation of this text. The ambiguity is this: does this command apply only to the original apostles, or perhaps more plausibly, to a teaching office or magisterial authority in the church grounded in the apostolate?<sup>8</sup> Or does this text apply to all believers? In the case that the latter view is accepted, what is the force of the command? Does it mean that all believers, in some sense, have to be missionaries to be obedient to Christ?<sup>9</sup>

Even among the churches of Christ this ambiguity has had major implications for our thinking about mission. On the one hand, there are many who think that missions involve special tasks in evangelism performed by trained workers who have a spiritual calling to that office. In this perspective, missionaries are professional staff members of churches who go to other places and cultures to plant churches.<sup>10</sup> Theologically, this view of mission exists as a logical successor to the idea that the call of a missionary is a call to a vocational office in the ministry of the church.

On the other hand, there is a remembrance among us of individuals who have stressed personal evangelism, the old Campus Advance programs of the sixties, and now the efforts of those individuals and congregations closely linked with the Boston Church of Christ who have widely fostered the notion that the raison d'être of the church is for each member to be an evangelist. Here, no doubt is left that Matthew 28:18-20 is to be read as a literal command of Christ to every believer. It is every bit as authoritative as any other

biblical word such as to repent or believe the gospel. This perspective is a logical successor to earlier radical interpretation that the Great Commission is binding upon all believers. Given the fact that this ambiguity is present in our understanding of Matthew 28:18-20 there is a need for further clarification as to what we understand to be the mission of the church—especially in light of the teaching of this basic text.

As a contribution toward promoting further discussion on these matters we wish to propose a thesis. We will argue that Matthew 28:18-20 warrants neither the view that mission is an exclusive vocation of the ministerial office or that it demands that every Christian is called to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Rather, the Great Commission is a statement of vision not a program of action. A missing dimension in modern views of mission is to see the passage for what it is: an announcement to the church (in nucleus in the eleven), that upon his resurrection, Jesus has universal authority and consequently Gentiles (as well as Jews) are to submit to the claims of that authority by discipleship. The mission emphasis is not on the “going” but on the universality of Christ’s claim and demand.

Procedurally, we will substantiate our argument in the following way. First, we will show that the modern distortion of this text had its origin in certain extremist positions on mission taken at the Reformation and that have continued more or less ever since. Second, we will view Matthew 28:18-20, in its original context, as a response to the earliest crisis of mission in the church. Finally, we will set forth the implication of our research for resolving the contemporary misunderstandings of world mission in the church today.

### **The Reformation Division over the Great Commission**

When the unity of Western Christianity collapsed at the Reformation a major crisis in vision of the world mission of the church occurred. It is of special interest to note that an ambiguity in interpreting the Great Commission figured prominently in the crisis.

One wing of the Reformation (the magisterial Reformers such as Luther and Calvin) believed that, at best, the Great Commission was only binding on the ordained ministry of the Church. Another branch of the Reformation (the Anabaptists and their sympathizers) took the position that the Great Commission was an ordinance of the Lord applicable to all believers. The impact of this division is still felt in the contemporary church.

Although the magisterial Reformers had broken with Rome, many were still convinced that they could only maintain the continuity of the Reformation if it were backed by the power of the princes and rulers of the various realms. Thus the principle of cuius regio eius religio, "to each territory its own faith system" gained widespread support. This had major ramifications for the mainstream Reformed view of missions.

It meant that in those states where the Reformation had taken hold the old theocratic vision of the Middle Ages continued. The church had already spread over all the territories in Europe held by the princes and rulers favorable to the Reformation; and they had little interest in what happened beyond their realms. By infant baptism most were already part of the body of Christendom. Pure Christianity simply involved the purification of the church to live by faith and not by works.

Luther paid little attention to issues of world mission. He argued that the Great Commission was binding only upon the first apostles and had been fulfilled.<sup>11</sup> His view was very influential. Beza claimed flatly that the Great Commission was no longer operative<sup>12</sup> and in 1651 the theological faculty at Wittenberg pronounced that the Great Commission was fulfilled in the first century and that the contemporary heathen heirs of those who did not obey stood under God's judgement as a result.<sup>13</sup> If one wanted to be a missionary one could only legitimately pursue this vocation upon appointment by the established church — but it was basically indifferent to the enterprise.

Calvin taught that the gospel was declared to the whole world by the apostles. At his time, in keeping with God's providential

design, mission occurred as the church spread through the world by internal growth and persecution; but world mission was not a matter of deliberate strategy.<sup>14</sup> Mission was not a “mark” of the Church. This interpretation of the Great Commission lasted throughout the period of Protestant Orthodoxy and was not seriously challenged until the end of the eighteenth century.

Interestingly enough a version of this interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20 was also held among the first leaders of the Campbell-Stone Movement. The early Alexander Campbell took the position that the words of Matthew 28:18-20 were applicable only to the eleven who fulfilled the demands completely.<sup>15</sup> In taking this position he was standing in opposition to any idea that the apostles ordained other privileged men to carry on this task. This view was echoed by Robert Milligan who claimed that the valid commission to the church today was Revelation 22:17, “Let him that heareth say ‘come.’”<sup>16</sup> Matthew 28:18-20 was given only by implication to the church so that the demand to go to all nations, although binding upon the apostles, was not an important factor in the discipleship of those who lived in the era after the apostles.

This position has its analogue in the congregational life of the twentieth-century churches of Christ. For lengthy periods of this century there has been little enthusiasm for world mission. At the outbreak of World War II we had fewer than fifty missionaries overseas. And although there has been more interest in missions since the war, most people in the churches sense little responsibility to take the gospel to their neighbors, let alone those overseas.<sup>17</sup> Most consider overseas missions a vocation for professionals. Thus, in practice, the interpretation by the magisterial Reformers that “the missionary” is a vocational office of the church holds sway in the churches today.

Nevertheless, we have not lost sight entirely of a very different and influential interpretation of mission that arose at the Reformation. This position held that the Great Commission was binding as God’s ordinance on all believers. If anything, the fact that it was spoken by the risen Lord added weight and urgency to its demand upon the believer.

Among the Anabaptists, and like-minded groups, the idea of cuius regio, eius religio was anathema. These groups constantly asserted the importance of Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof. . ." <sup>18</sup> From this they drew the conclusion that no prince or magistrate could hinder the preaching of the gospel and the freely chosen obedient response to it by believers. The earth is the Lord's. And the risen Christ has told them (Mark 16:15) to go and preach the gospel everywhere. And they did. For example, the sixteenth-century Moravians went across the entire German-speaking territories, Lorraine, Scandinavia, Poland, Italy, and Hungary. <sup>19</sup> The later Pietists from Moravia attempted to go to the whole world. The Great Commission was to be literally obeyed.

Although the Anabaptist movement and the Pietists met with reversals in Europe their ideas have had tremendous impact. It was the invoking of similar ideas by the Baptist William Carey that helped to build the foundation for the great era of missionary expansion: Latourette's 'Great Century' from 1815-1914. <sup>20</sup> As had the earlier Anabaptists, Carey countered the arguments set forth by the heirs of the magisterial Reformation that the Great Commission was no longer relevant for the church. Although he was a cobbler, and his arguments were met by scorn from even his fellow Baptists, his great work in India where he lived out his beliefs helped his views gain great influence in English Christianity. (As a teenager I read the story of his life and it is still very influential in many of the countries of the British Commonwealth.)

Indeed, ultimately the interpretation of those in the Believers' churches has become standard fare in missionary circles in twentieth-century churches of Christ. Many devout believers still venture forth today into foreign lands to plant churches convinced that their obedience to Christ is not complete until they literally go overseas—in direct obedience to Matthew 28:18-20. But is this a privileged interpretation? Are all believers who do not venture forth to foreign lands to preach the gospel lacking in full obedience to Christ?

Perhaps, as a fellowship, since we draw theological strands from both the Reformed Protestantism of Calvin and the ecclesiology

of the Believers' churches, we are stuck with a dilemma over our understanding of the Great Commission. At any rate we believe that a fresh look at Matthew 28:18-20, in the context of the discussion about mission in the early church, may help us discover some important missing dimensions in our time.

### The Crisis in Early Christian Mission

In the earliest days in the Jerusalem church there appeared to be two distinct views of mission. These two visions were associated with two different groups that emerged out of the Jerusalem church.<sup>21</sup> On the one hand, there were the hebraioi (Hebrew or Aramaic speaking Jews who believed Jesus was the Messiah). These believers had become convinced that the anticipated restoration of Israel from its terrible misfortunes had commenced with the ministry of Jesus. As a result of his mission the true Israel had been re-constituted and awaited the final events of history (Acts 1:6-8; 3:20-21). Built on the pillars of the apostles (Gal. 2:9), the Hebrews had witnessed the ingathering of Israel starting on Pentecost. They lived in eager expectation of a pilgrimage of the Gentiles to Jerusalem to complete the ingathering (Is. 2:2-4; Ps. 47:7a; Is. 56:3-7; Zech. 8:20-23). Then God's purposes would be complete.

In a way this vision encompassed world salvation. It was supposed to occur through a kind of centripetal action; of their own accord repentant Gentiles would come to Jerusalem. Aside from the fulfillment of God's purposes there was no enabling factor involved.<sup>23</sup> Restored Israel (note that the apostles were in no hurry to leave Jerusalem) waited in Zion for the climactic events of the end of history.

But there was also another vision of mission. This vision was held by the hellēnistai (Greek speaking Jews who believed Jesus was Messiah).<sup>24</sup> The average church member today is not aware of the great impact these early believers (Stephen, Paul, Barnabas, Philip, Silas, and John Mark) have had on the Christian movement. As far as we know, these were the first to work out the universal implications of what was entailed in Jesus' death at Golgotha replacing the

temple as a means of atonement<sup>25</sup> And it was probably in this circle that the famous hymn on the descent, humiliation, and exaltation of Christ (Phil. 2:6-11), was composed. On the basis of the belief system that Jesus died for our sins and was exalted as universal Lord, the Hellenists precipitated a momentous act. Some of them went to Antioch, the great city of western Syria, and there invited Gentiles to become part of the restored people of God on the grounds of faith in Jesus (Acts 11:20-21).

This incident sent alarm bells all over ancient Palestine; especially in those places where Jews were already suffering taunts from their fellow countrymen for believing in Jesus as Messiah. The pages of the New Testament reflect throughout the shockwaves of this occurrence. The vision of Peter, the Jerusalem conference, the missionary journeys of Paul—all seem to confirm the fact that a mission to the Gentiles was valid. But doubts remained. No one could deny that Jesus of Nazareth had exhibited very little interest in Gentiles during his earthly ministry. Was it truly the case that his obedient followers should engage in a mission to convert them?

It is in this context that we are to understand the vision of Matthew. Matthew says yes—Gentiles are called to be part of the people of God as long as they are taught to observe the commandments in keeping with the interpretation of the master teacher: Jesus of Nazareth (Matt. 28:19-20). In so doing Matthew mediates the conflicting views of mission between the Hebrews and Hellenists which appeared in earliest Christianity.

### **World Mission in Matthew 28:18-20**

In looking at this text we are struck immediately with the fact that the unit is bound together by use of the word “all” (Greek: pas). All authority is given to Jesus (Matt. 28:18); the demand is to disciple all the Gentiles and teach them all things (28:19); and the promise is that Jesus will be with them all of their days until the end. Since most of the terminology in the unit (disciples, Gentiles or nations etc.) has been used frequently throughout the Gospel, one can only conclude that Matthew, in the closing lines of the Gospel, by use of the word

“all” brings to a climactic ending the story he has been setting forth throughout.<sup>26</sup>

There is an interesting formal correspondence between this passage and 2 Chronicles 36:22-23. As Matthew 28:18-20 is the last unit in Matthew, 2 Chronicles 36:22-23 is the last unit in the Hebrew Bible. The verses in Chronicles are in the form of a proclamation of Cyrus who announces that the Lord God of heaven had given him power over all the kingdoms of the earth, charged him to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and invokes the divine presence upon the people of God.<sup>27</sup> It would appear that in these last verses of the story of Jesus in Matthew a new proclamation is set forth. It is now Jesus (not Cyrus) who has all authority. And it is the presence of Jesus, not an earthly king, that now rests with God’s people. Finally, the scene takes place not on mount Zion but in Galilee, presumably a site overlooking the Gentile territories (28:16; cf. 4:14).

The argument of 28:18-20 falls into three major areas: (a) the investiture of total authority on Jesus; (b) the demand to make disciples of the Gentiles; (c) the promise to be with the eleven always. We will now discuss each of these areas.

### Investiture *(“all authority . . . is given to me”)*

Since the legitimacy of the Gentile mission was in doubt, the issue of its authority was an essential point that Matthew needed to discuss.

According to Matthew, Jesus’ ministry from its beginnings was characterized as having authority (7:29). He had authority to stand as God’s special representative and forgive sins (9:6). Of central importance is 10:1-42. There Jesus gives authority to the twelve to carry out a mission of healing and proclamation only to Israel (10:5-6). These words were given at a particular place and time. In the view of the Hebrews they legitimated a mission to the Jews. It was the first commission which, as such, was widely believed to have special significance.<sup>28</sup>

But for Matthew that was not the end of the story. In the account of the first commission Jesus tells the twelve they will not have finished the mission to Israel until they see that the Son of Man has come (10:23). As most commentators note, the allusion is to Daniel 7:13-14, where in the Greek Bible, the Son of Man is invested with all authority and power over the Gentiles. Now, in the scene of Jesus before the high priest (Matt. 26:64) there is an anticipation of the appearance of the Son of Man. For Matthew, this anticipation is realized when the risen Jesus appears to his re-assembled disciples in Galilee (28:18). In congruence with Daniel 7:14, the sphere of Jesus' authority from God is over heaven and earth. And there, in the presence of the eleven, he makes a second commission to go to all the Gentiles, on the basis of his universal Lordship. The first commission to take the word to Israel is now, appropriately, given a universal extension.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, Matthew's mediating position on the issue of Gentile mission comes through. For the Hebrews the mission to Israel has priority; but for the Hellenists there is also a good word. There has been a second commission from the risen Lord, again to the apostolate, that verifies a universal mission to the Gentiles.

### Commission (*"make disciples of the Gentiles . . ."*)

With the matter of the universal authority of Jesus settled, the commission to the eleven is set forth. We read that the eleven are told to go and make disciples of the Gentiles. Several points are worthy of note as we discuss the commission.

First, it is important to understand the Greek grammatical construction behind the translation "go and make disciples." The linguistic characteristic of the use of the participle ("go," poreuthentes) followed by an imperative ("make disciples," mathēteusate) is often used by Matthew. The feature of this stylistic characteristic is that the participle serves in a subordinate way to supplement the action of the main verb where the emphasis rests (cf. 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27).<sup>30</sup> Thus the weight and emphasis of the text is not on the action of going or leaving but in "making disciples".

For Matthew the making of disciples entails both the announcement of the universal Lordship of Christ and the placing of demands on hearers who accept that truth to live in a way that is congruent with this new reality.

This point is driven home by the twofold use of "them" (Greek: autous) in 28:19. Those who believe in the universal Lordship of Christ are to be baptized and taught to observe all things that Jesus, in the Gospel of Matthew, taught his disciples. For starters this includes the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>31</sup> As Karl Barth has said, the call to the eleven to make disciples is to "make them what you yourselves are."<sup>32</sup> This is the missing dimension in modern understanding of the mission theology of Matthew 28:19-20. Mission is a call to discipleship. It is not a call to action for its own sake.

Second, the commission is to make disciples. The word "disciple" is used both in verbal and substantive forms in Matthew.<sup>33</sup> For Matthew the disciple is anyone who does the will of the Father (12:46-50). As ones who walked with Jesus, received his instruction, and listened to his exposition of God's will, the eleven are disciples par excellence.<sup>34</sup> Hearing the Sermon on the Mount the true disciple is one who takes up his cross to follow Jesus (16:24). With this picture of the nature of discipleship given by Matthew in mind, the view of the Great Commission argued by the magisterial Reformers dissolves. Mission was not limited to the eleven or to an ordained ministry. As the eleven disciples had submitted to the universal authority of Jesus, so every believer who has come since that time is called to do the same; and, indeed, part of discipleship is to pass on this legacy to others.

Third, it is most noticeable in the text that the process of discipleship is to take place among the Gentiles. As the eleven were commissioned to go to the Jews, now they are to go to the Gentiles.<sup>35</sup>

For Matthew, this is an event of considerable significance. Since Christ has now been invested with universal authority an ancient

promise given to Abraham has now been fulfilled. In Genesis 12:3 God had promised that all of the peoples of the earth would be blessed through the agency of Abraham. In Genesis 18:18 and 22:18 that promise is reiterated. In the text of the Greek Bible the same expression (panta ta ethnē) "all the nations" is used in Genesis 18:18 and 22:18 as is used in Matthew 28:19. Matthew is saying that through the life and work of Jesus God has provided the way to exercise his universal claim over all peoples and has consequently fulfilled his promises to take his blessings to them.

It is interesting to note that in Matthew 1:1-2, Matthew starts his story by tracing the lineage of Jesus back to Abraham. The Magi (Gentile leaders) visit Jesus at his birth and pay him homage. In 3:9 Jesus warns the Jews not to presume upon their ancestral connections with Abraham because God may raise up new children (the Messiah and his spiritual heirs).<sup>36</sup> Throughout Jesus' ministry there are hints (e.g. 8:11) that Gentiles will finally be a beneficiary of his mission. In 24:14 this is promised. In 28:19 it is delivered.<sup>37</sup>

Thus I would suggest that Matthew 28:19 is a high water mark in biblical religion. It is the fulfillment of a story that started at the beginning of the Bible when God made promises to Abraham to bless all humans. Upon the exaltation of Jesus the universal call to all to accept the authority of Christ is not just to be tolerated but is the essence of our belief. The word of Matthew is that it is through mission that the promises to Abraham come to fulfillment. In mission God is bringing the long-hoped pilgrimage of the nations to fruition.

### Promise

*("I am with you . . . until the end")*

Thus the world mission of Jesus is to continue until the end of time. In Matthew 10:23 the twelve were promised that before they ended their mission to Israel they would see the coming of the Son of Man. Now in the coming of 28:16-20 the promise of the abiding presence of the one whose yoke is easy and whose load is light (11:30) is renewed. He will be with his followers forever.

Later disciples, often under great duress, have heard the call to announce the universal authority of Christ and have gone and discipled various peoples. This mandate continues for the church today. Despite abuses in carrying out the task of mission, the fact remains that the world must never forget that Jesus is universal Lord.

### Conclusion

Throughout, we have persistently emphasized the point that central to the Great Commission was the call of Jesus for an active discipleship to take place among the Gentiles as a result of his investiture to universal Lordship.

For Matthew, mission has its origin in this basic reality. As an act of grace the eleven (Jews) are commissioned to invite the Gentiles to be good subjects of king Jesus. The Gentile mission is unreservedly affirmed. This understanding of mission as discipleship which, in essence, united the earliest factions in the church, is the missing dimension in mainstream discussions of missions since the Reformation.

As we have noted, Matthew certainly does consider obedience to the Great Commission as central to discipleship. It is clearly an integral part of the holy life that marks the church. It is not to be restricted to an ordained clergy based on the apostolate. From the first to the twentieth century the matter of "making disciples" is the duty of all believers.

In the light of this study the following insights commend themselves to the contemporary church:

1. The lack of emphasis on the "going," in the text, should make us dubious of those who are consumed with the mechanics and strategies of evangelizing nations rather than the more important issue of making disciples. It is noticeable that a preoccupation with mission strategy is essentially absent in the New Testament.
2. The New Testament gives no sanction to the idea that making disciples is a prerogative of professional mis-

sionaries who work in foreign countries and not in our neighborhood or city. There is something odd about a congregation that boasts about the great work it is doing in Africa while it is not bringing anyone to conversion at home.

3. One cannot but notice that the current success of missions in many undeveloped countries may have some connection with the widespread desire to obtain Western technology and fascination for its culture. We must always remember that, for Matthew, to make disciples is to live in keeping with the demands of the Sermon on the Mount. When this message is set forth clearly the gospel of Jesus may not be any more popular in the third world than it is in the West.
4. The current fragmentation in the American Restoration Movement duplicates itself in the various mission churches abroad. Our failure to humble ourselves and unite in the interest of Jesus' mission mocks our claim to be servants of the one who has all authority. An appreciation of discipleship as the missing dimension of the Great Commission may cause us to be more serious in addressing this issue.

It is now more than twenty years since I attended the very moving funeral service of Kenneth Latourette. I have often wondered since what would be his verdict on the twentieth century. Would he entitle it "the ecumenical century?" Many do. Could it be called another "Great Century" of missionary expansion? Only time and the future verdict of other historians will tell. But of one thing we are certain. If the churches of Christ are going to be a truly universal fellowship, and play a role on the global scene, we must recapture our theological center. Thus, we could do a lot worse than take a fresh look at the vision of world mission that emerged in the earliest decades of the church in the foundational text of Matthew 28:18-20; that is, the way of discipleship is mission.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> K. S. Latourette, "New Perspectives in Church History," Journal of Religion 21 (1941) 432.

<sup>2</sup> K. S. Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, C E P reprinted edition in seven volumes first published in 1937-1945 and slightly revised, 1970).

<sup>3</sup> Latourette, "New Perspectives," 435 reminds us that the powerful Han dynasty in China had as much right to refer to itself as an oikoumenē (world wide culture) as did Rome during its period of empire.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 436-438. It should be also noted that Latourette was responsible for a phrase that has had enormous currency in the history of missions. I refer to his term, "The Great Century." By this he meant the period from 1800-1914. Every study of the history of Protestant missions must come to grips with the reasons why this was the era that actually accomplished making Christianity a global phenomenon. For an interesting typology of the history of missions that takes this factor into account see W. R. Hogg, "The Rise of Protestant Missionary Concern, 1517-1914," The Theology of the Christian Mission, Gerald H. Anderson ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961) 95-111.

<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, in theological discussion issues about mission and evangelism have been addressed under the general rubric of the "marks" of the church. cf. John H. Yoder, "A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," The Concept of the Believer's Church, James Leo Garrett, Jr. ed., (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1969) 260. Churches of Christ have considered as essential to the identity of the pure restored church the proclamation of the one gospel (Gal. 1:6-9); and administration of the ordinances (believer's baptism and the Lord's Supper) as the appropriate evidence for its apostolicity. We have also insisted that the holiness of the church is not just a holiness imputed to us by virtue of our Lord, but that it involves a lifestyle that must be concretely worked out in life. Mission and evangelism as outreach to others is viewed as an integral part of that lifestyle. Or to put it in another way, mission and discipleship are fundamentally linked together. On the whole issue of the "marks" of the church and the peculiar contribution of churches of Christ to this discussion see Allan J. McNicol, "Apostolicity and Holiness: The Basis for Christian Fellowship II," Mission 18/8 (1985) 16-20.

<sup>6</sup> Whether ethnē should be translated as peoples, Gentiles, nations, or something else will be discussed below.

<sup>7</sup> Mark 16:15 has traditionally also figured strongly in discussions about the world mission of the church. Of course, in recent years, both the

issue of the secondary character of Mark, and the questionable textual history of this verse has rendered it somewhat problematic in the discussion. The parallels to Matthew 28:18-20 in Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; and John 20:21 are important. In this essay we will concentrate our attention on the Matthean version of the Great Commission which, historically, has dominated the discussion. Nevertheless a full discussion of an early Christian theology of mission would need to take these texts into close consideration.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew W. Seumois, "The Evolution of Mission Theology Among Roman Catholics," in Theology of Christian Mission, 130 states flatly that from the Roman Catholic position, "mission activity is a specific task, quite distinct in the ecclesiastical ministry." In other words, mission is the work of the priesthood.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Yoder, The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1972) 19-20 acutely observes that many Protestants have said that the demand of Matthew 28:18-20 is normative for believers but should not be understood literally. These interpreters would say that the Great Commission should be filtered through some other theological discriemen such as "our common sense," or "the way things are." The more sophisticated versions of these attempts to read the Gospels (one thinks particularly here of the Sermon on the Mount) through some particular foundation in theology or philosophy have recently come under heavy assault. See Stanley Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>10</sup> It is quite astonishing to note the pace of growth of the "missions industry" in churches of Christ in the past decade. We have seen the emergence of sophisticated programs, in the Christian colleges, of cross-cultural studies of the third-world, the appearance of all sorts of meta-experts on the missionary enterprise, and the founding of institutes that exist solely to facilitate support services for missions. As a whole these trends are a positive development. But one simply raises the question as to what theology of mission informs the trend. One suspects that in a headlong attempt to "get results," as a very pragmatic people, we are quite prepared to adopt from the wider ecumenical community any method "that works" regardless of whether the development of a body of professional missionaries actually may stand in tension with a Believer's church theology of mission.

<sup>11</sup> Latourette, "Expansion," III, 25.

<sup>12</sup> F. H. Littell, The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church (London: Macmillan, 1964) 116. Littell sites as his authority the work of Gustav Warneck, the great nineteenth-century historian of missions.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Harry R. Boer, Pentecost and Missions (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans, 1961) 19-20,23.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Campbell, "A Familiar Dialogue between the Editor and a Clergyman—Part II," The Christian Baptist, Alexander Campbell ed., (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Co., 1983 seven volumes in one edition of the 1835 second revised edition) 85.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Milligan, An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption as it is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 14th printing of the 1868 edition) 515-517.

<sup>17</sup> An indicator in favor of this position is the fact that in most mainline urban churches of Christ it is almost impossible to get members to bring non-Christians to the regular assembly—let alone evangelistic services or home Bible studies.

<sup>18</sup> F. H. Littell, "The Anabaptist Theology of Mission," Anabaptism and Mission, Wilbert R. Shenk ed., (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1984) 17; also in the same volume David Shank, "Anabaptists and Mission," 215. The latter points out that the Anabaptists were intrigued by Matthew 28:18-20 because it held central the idea of the universal authority of Christ. If Christ was a universal ruler then the earthly rulers of Christendom were not. Therefore the ordinances of the earthly rulers were either non-operative or at best provisional. What counted were the ordinances of Christ and ecclesologically the most significant one was thought to be Matthew 28:18-20.

<sup>19</sup> John H. Yoder, "Reformation and Missions: A Literature Survey," Anabaptism and Mission, 49.

<sup>20</sup> William Carey, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens (London: The Carey Kingsgate Press, 1961 facsimile of the original 1792 edition).

<sup>21</sup> Ben Meyer, Critical Realism and the New Testament PTMS 17 (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1989) 173-194.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 6:1; cf. 2 Cor. 11:22; Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:14

<sup>23</sup> Meyer, "Critical Realism," 177

<sup>24</sup> M. Hengel, Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity (London: Fortress Press, 1983) 9, gives us solid information on the origins of the hellenistai (Hellenists).

<sup>25</sup> M. Hengel, The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 49-52.

<sup>26</sup> It is probable that Matthew is not using the form of an enthronement ceremony as is the position of F. Hahn, Mission in the New Testament, SIBT

47 (London: SCM Press, 1965) 63-68. Neither is this precisely a prophetic commissioning scene. On the latter note B. J. Hubbard, The Matthean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20 SBLDS 19 (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, 1974).

<sup>27</sup> For more discussion see B. Malina, "The Literary Structure and Form of Matthew 28:16-20," New Testament Studies 17 (1970-71) 87-103.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Romans 1:14-16; Acts 13:16

<sup>29</sup> P. T. O'Brien, "The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not," Reformed Theological Review 35 (1976) 72.

<sup>30</sup> This construction may be designated as a pleonasm. Some as David J. Bosch, Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980) 68-69, have suggested that the word "go" be left out of the translation altogether. At any rate the idea of crossing geographical boundaries is very much in the background here. I would suggest the free translation, "therefore leave and get into the business of making disciples among all the Gentiles."

<sup>31</sup> Here again we see the mediating position of Matthew between the Hebrews and the Hellenists. The mission to the Gentiles by the Hellenists is totally affirmed. But the Hebrews are accommodated by such passages as Matthew 5:17-20, 13:52 and the very strong Jewish outlook of the gospel as a whole.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth, "An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16-20," Theology of the Christian Mission, 63.

<sup>33</sup> In particular the latter. See the famous article of Ulrich Luz, "The Disciples in the Gospel According to Matthew," The Interpretation of Matthew, Graham Stanton ed., (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 98-128.

<sup>34</sup> O'Brien, "The Great Commission," 76 contrasts the Matthean picture of the twelve with that of Luke. For Luke the twelve are eyewitnesses. For Matthew they are "earwitnesses."

<sup>35</sup> I do not accept the position of many scholars that the first commission to go to Israel was negated by the second commission to go to the Gentiles. That view has been well answered by Amy-Jill Levine, The Social and Ethnic Dimensions of Matthean Social History SBEC 14 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988) 178-204.

<sup>36</sup> Ray Brown, The Birth of the Messiah (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977) 68. Brown thinks that in 3:9 Matthew has in mind the same interpretation of Genesis 22:18 LXX as is exemplified in Acts 3:25 and Galatians 3:8,16: namely that the seed of Abraham is Christ.

<sup>37</sup> An important exegetical issue should be noted here. In all cases in Matthew the use of ta ethnē (4:15; 6:32; 10:5, 18; 12:18, 21; 20:19, 25) can be understood as "Gentiles" as distinct from Israel. cf. O'Brien "The Great Commission," 74. However, the term panta ta ethnē ("all the Gentiles") in 24:9, 14, 25:32, and 28:19 is more ambiguous. Does it refer to all peoples, "Jew and Gentile," or to the Gentiles apart from Israel? Probably this use of equivocal terminology by Matthew is done as part of his theological mediation between the Hebrews and the Hellenists. In his earthly ministry Jesus went only to Israel. But now that the sphere of his authority is recognized as universal so is his mission. Thus in 28:19 ethnē means "the Gentiles," in the sense that the mission to the Jews that never ceased now is expanded to involve a mission to all people. Finally, the idea that ethnē refers to nation-states in Matthew is an anachronism. There is no evidence that Matthew thought in these terms.

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