

**MISSION IMPERATIVES IN GOSPEL MINISTRY:
BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON MISSIOLOGICAL STRATEGY
MATTHEW 28:16-20**

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“Mission Imperatives in Gospel Ministry” is a renewed call for theologians, pastors and missionaries to focus afresh on biblical perspectives for primary missiological strategy. It assumes three basic presuppositions: an evangelical stance, the authority of Scripture, and the Great Commission as binding on the Church to communicate the Gospel to all nations, peoples, tongues and tribes.

Introduction

This discussion highlights some disturbing issues in today’s understanding of the pristine command of Christ in Matthew 28. It compares current practices with those of the first century Church. This brief study spotlights the “crux” of a contemporary problem. Webster defines “crux” as 1) a difficult problem; a puzzling thing; 2) a crucial point; a critical moment; 3) the essential or deciding point. Hopefully this paper will clear up some confusion and clarify the central, crucial issue of ministry and mission defined in Matthew 28:16-20.

As the theme for their joint 1998 Annual Meeting, The Evangelical Theological Society and the Evangelical Missiological Society selected “*Teach Them . . . All Things.*” They took this from the text of Matthew 28:18-20. Being a large gathering of professors, theologians and practitioners, this seemed an appropriate title for the convocation. But did this theme truly reflect the heart of the text, or did it fall short of it? Is teaching them all things an accurate definition of our task? Is our responsibility purely to “teach them all things” as if abundant knowledge was the epitome of highest truth? That depends largely on how we understand this text in Matthew, and how it is applied and practiced in reaching the goals and roles of teaching in discipling the nations. The following analysis of these verses suggests six leading observations which have vital application to missiology into the twenty-first century.

The Simplicity

The first observation is that the statements of this commonly called Great Commission seem so simple, though certainly they are not simplistic. Here is profound simplicity indeed. Matthew 28:18-20 breaks down into three clear elements. First, Christ’s power and authority was provided. “*All authority has been given unto Me in heaven and on earth*” [1]. Second, Christ’s purpose was simply proclaimed. “*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you*” [2]. Lastly, Christ’s presence was promised to the participants until His purpose is completed. “*And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” [3]. While seemingly simple, these three pregnant concepts carry with them complex and profound implications.

The poignant word “*therefore*” directly follows the astounding claim of Christ’s unconditional, unlimited authority, thus focusing attention on purpose, result, and expectation. On the basis of His authority and in line with His supreme purpose He commands the disciples to go, baptize, teach and make disciples. It sounds so simple, but encompasses a complicated set of factors, strategies and methods, extended timing and inter-cultural complexities.

Furthermore, it involves the *person* of the messenger, following a prescribed *process*, with a *purpose* of producing a particular *product*. This is simple and clear. The process provides a watershed between the old model and the new direction, moving from the force of law to the power of grace, going beyond Jews alone to include all the Gentiles, and bridging from the Jewish Age to the Church Age. These last words of Christ succinctly provide the “Magna Carta” for missionary endeavor in the risen Christ’s worldwide program. Simple? Yes. Easy? No!

The Structure

A second observation centers on the grammatical structure, which is precise and focused. Note four obvious verbs in order: *go, make disciples, baptize, and teach*. More precisely these are actually three verbal participles with one imperative which is found only in “*make disciples*.” However, the three helping participles: *going, baptizing and teaching*, are governed by the command to make disciples. Hence, these three participles also partake of the flavor of the imperative verb to which they are intimately and actively linked. Thus this structure of verbal components is replete with actions culminating in a specific product.

Today’s programs of discipleship almost always focus on Christians, or those within the fold of the Church, working for the believers’ renewal and growth. It is largely an “inreach” of the Church. This is not to be disparaged. However, this biblical text indicates that *making disciples* is clearly focused on the *unbelieving* world of unreached and unengaged peoples. It begins with an initial focus on evangelism and outreach, but continues on to a place of incorporation through teaching that produces functioning saints. Making disciples is not focused on the ninety-nine in the shepherd’s safe keeping, but on the one lost in the wild. Discipling is a biblical mandate for deliberate “outreach” of the Church to the unchurched and unreached peoples of the world. Two kinds of foundational leaders and workers comprise the Church: fishermen and shepherds. The fishermen are for outreach, the shepherds for the nurture and care of the churched flock. Evangelists are the fishers of men. Teachers are more like shepherds. Dr. Donald McGavran used the term “*discipling*” for the first part of the process and “*perfecting*” for the latter part in making active disciples. He wrote, “A Chief and irreplaceable purpose of Christian mission is to proclaim Christ and to persuade men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church” [4]. To make disciples is the initial task of missions, a task that sends believers out into the virgin ripened harvests to reap and gather in. Why then does less than two per cent of the missionary enterprise reach out to the least evangelized? Why then, according to Todd Johnson’s research, do eighty-six per cent of Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus not personally know a Christian?

Unfortunately, in this text Jesus did not precisely define for us what He meant by “make disciples.” However, the disciples obviously understood His meaning very clearly. In fact, not many days after Christ’s post-resurrection command, and directly after Pentecost, the Apostles reveal what they specifically understood making disciples meant. This is revealed in their initial and continuing practice of starting the first fellowships of Christ’s followers, recorded in Acts 2:22-47. See Diagram 1.

Note the systematic steps in this process:

- The mixed crowd in Jerusalem heard the Gospel. (22-36)
- They were convicted in their hearts. (37)
- They were called to repent, to be baptized for the remission of sins, and to receive the Holy Spirit. (38-41)
- They gladly received the Gospel, and by baptism were incorporated into the Church. (41)
- They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, as well as in communion (breaking of bread) and prayer. (42)
- They shared their possessions with all, and daily worshipped and praised God. (44-46)
- Their witness had an effect on the whole community around them, gaining favor with all the people, who feared because of the power of God evident in their midst. (43, 46b, 47)
- The Church increased as the Lord added to the Church daily. (47)

**MAKING DISCIPLES
THROUGH THE CHURCH Acts 2:22-47**

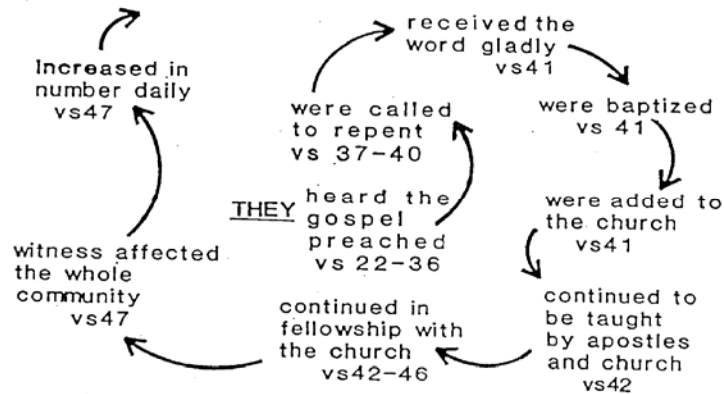


Diagram 1 Acts 2:22-47.

This pristine pattern portrays what making disciples meant to the early Church, driving the believers onward and outward to turn the world upside down [5].

One more thing needs discussion in this structural analysis. Jesus had a greater more extensive goal in mind. It was not just a local or ethnocentric mission. It had a more comprehensive and global objective. This was in keeping with God’s covenant for

“blessing all families of the earth” in Genesis 12:1-4, as well as His intentional witness “to the ends of the earth” in Acts 1:8.

The followers of Jesus were to make disciples “*panta ta ethne*.” These three Greek words, meaning all the ethnic people groups in all nations, are unmistakably linked to the imperative “make disciples.” They qualify it. Making disciples is focused not only on the local community nearby, but also on all the nations, peoples, tongues and tribes around the world.

John Wesley correctly claimed “The World is my parish.” Unfortunately many church leaders today often reverse this emphasis, erroneously thinking and acting as if “My parish is my world.” Obviously local ministry is essential but not necessarily the end of the mission of Jesus. Those who say they fulfill this command to make disciples by working *only* in their local church, or just in their immediate community, or exclusively in their own country alone, fail to comprehend the full measure of Christ’s purpose here. *Panta ta ethne* qualifies the command, focusing its impact not on Jews in Jerusalem or the region of Judea alone, nor even on the scattered Jewish Diaspora, but on *all peoples*, including every ethnic group on Planet Earth. Mission across cultures is hereby commanded. The Lord expected obedience from His disciples. Yet two thousand years later is the Church still focused on itself, rather than on completing Christ’s poignant last command? Again, these statements concerning His priorities for mission and objectives of ministry are simple, yet precise. They are also profound and complex.

The Strategy

A third observation is strategically centered. While making disciples starts with going and heralding the Gospel, it does not stop with conversion and baptism, but continues on through teaching. However, this teaching is not purely the transmission of knowledge. For the meaning of the present, infinitive, active word here is “*to observe*” and is better translated “to observe practically or keep strictly.” Dr. Joseph Thayer suggests several nuances of meaning: “to attend to carefully, to take care of, to guard, to keep . . . not to leave” [6]. So the teaching is to cause the hearers to adhere to, follow, obey, and actually hold the thing fast. “Be ye doers of the word and not hearers only” is meant [7]. The work of teaching is to develop righteous deeds, not just know right doctrine. It requires continuous training in conduct, not merely in creed. Is there a difference between teaching to know and teaching to obey? Those of us who have children certainly know that difference.

Evangelism and mission are measured not only by the obedience of the messengers in going, baptizing, teaching and making disciples. They are also measured in the lives of the recipients: those who hear and heed the Gospel -- believing, being baptized, being instructed, and obeying all -- a fuller obedience than we generally expect. George Patterson is correct when he suggests “an obedient oriented curriculum” as the best measuring tool to use in evaluating any teaching program.

I remember a valuable lesson I learned thirty-five years ago when I submitted my final research project report to the International Institute of Christian Communication in Kenya, Africa. When I wrote the report to send it in to my mentor, I was under great pressure as I was running several church planting projects and a new leaders training program simultaneously. I was somewhat surprised that the report received a “B” grade. The cause was clear. I had not adequately detailed the implementation of how the findings in the research were to be applied -- that is, how the project was to be obeyed. I did not challenge the grade, although actually I had already fully implemented the principles of the paper in setting up a practical three-year lay pastor training program, which was already operational. However, a vital lesson was reinforced in my mind. The bottom line is not knowledge, but always active, practical obedience. It is not interpretation alone but application, practice and obedient action that really counts.

By Christ’s commissioning His disciples “to teach them to obey all things I have commanded you,” He was also projecting a reproductive model. Consider what “to obey all things” meant in the *immediate* context of His command to the disciples? What had Jesus just commanded the disciples to do? See Diagram 2. As His believing followers, they were told to go, baptize, teach and make disciples. Therefore they were to teach the new converts to go, to be baptized and also to obey His commands, thus becoming part of

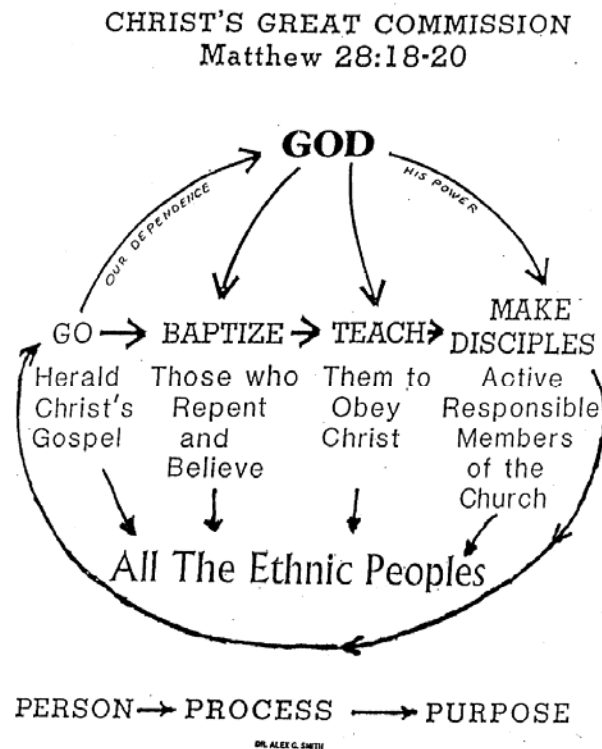


Diagram 2. Model of Repeated Replication

this continuous reproductive model. These new followers themselves were to be going, baptizing, and teaching those who responded to their own outreach to be faithful, obeying

responsible disciples. This continuous reproducible and reproductive model is God's genius for accomplishing world evangelization.

In the broader context some would argue that "all things Christ commanded" covers His teachings in the four Gospels, or even the whole counsel of God. We may agree that that should not be neglected, with the proviso that the emphasis be on practical obedience of being and doing, not just as hearers of the word. Obedience not observation is intended. While the recent division of involvement in mission of "goers" and "senders" has its appropriate place, it does miss the true impact of the responsibility of *all* believers to be actively and personally involved in witness to unreached peoples, both in their own peoples and among other ethnic groups in their communities. All church members, each working a paddle in the gospel racing boat, should row, not just sit as passengers while the pastor paddles. All believers are enlisted in the motto "The whole Church taking the whole Gospel to the whole world."

In 1865 J. Hudson Taylor wisely made a strategic paradigm shift. Prior to then the standard policy of mission agencies was to send out only ordained ministers as the Church's missionaries. Even William Carey, the celebrated Father of Modern Missions, was an ordained minister before he sailed for India in 1792. Breaking the traditional professional mentality of his time, Hudson Taylor recruited laymen and single women for cross-cultural service in China. Many "willing skillful" lay people from churches worldwide have joined missions under numerous agencies since then.

Beginning with the early church, several other models of obedient disciples going to the *ethne* arose. In the eighteenth chapter of the book of Acts Priscilla and Aquila exemplify this, as did the Apostle Paul himself. In more current times Christians, sent by their companies to work overseas professionally, have been effective witnesses and disciple makers in scores of people groups. Other believers, leaving the moneymaking rat-race, have voluntarily found professional openings so they could live and work among unreached peoples as so-called self supporting "tentmakers." Deliberately and quietly some nonresident missionaries have also labored to plant embryonic churches in difficult regions among resistant peoples. The newer trend of church partnerships working with specific overseas ethnic churches has potential value for expanded witness and intercultural understanding. Each of these models has strengths and weaknesses. Too frequently however, like many mission agency involvement, these modern lay efforts focus on, or revert to, ministering mostly with Christians or local churches overseas, rather than among the unchurched. The ministry of "perfecting" also predominates, rather than that of reaching those outside the Gospel among all *ethne*. The least reached should be the first priority in the agendas of the church and her followers. It is crucial that Christ's disciples everywhere model the outreach design to make disciples and train the local believers, new and old alike, to repeat that process obediently.

The Synergism

The fourth observation sees the essence of this text synergistically enmeshed in a progressive process leading to corporate as well as personal growth in the midst of the

global expansion of the Church. From this text, the Apostles and early disciples were not just to proclaim, evangelize, and herald the Gospel they were also expected to accept a broader responsibility in the integral process. They were to help increase the growth and multiplication of churches by baptizing and teaching towards the measurable goal of making disciples who would obey, and in turn become part of the multiplying force, ever extending the Gospel to the whole world -- indeed to every people group. Thus the biblical focus of the Great Commission points to the body of Christ more than just to the individual. The command of Jesus has a corporate emphasis, not purely an individual one. The "one on one" theory stresses every believer is to make a disciple. This individual focus is surmounted by the commands to "make disciples"- plural not singular. You might be a member of an independent church, but an independent member of that body you cannot be. Individual members have a corporate responsibility to the Church.

Consequently, the evangelist's job does not stop at heralding the Gospel, but requires his/her assuming responsibility for the follow through, including baptism and also teaching of those who respond, so that they actively obey the Lord Jesus. This requires more of the evangelist than is often practiced. It calls for mass evangelists to become more concerned about conserving those who respond, by teaching and incorporating them into the Church. This progressive process therefore is synergistically entwined. Otherwise we end up with "half-baked" disciples falling short of full obedience in Christian living and reproductive expanding witness.

Nor are the teachers just to teach knowledge and pass on information to new followers of the Good News. They are also to develop believers in practical obedience. Similarly this may involve teachers in evangelism or pre-evangelistic ministry, not just teaching and training in the post-conversion stages of incorporation, nurture and maturing. While some have exceptional gifts in evangelism, teaching, or pastoring, their significant contribution to the synergistic process may also require them to accept responsibility beyond their special giftedness. A director of one mission hospital in Asia suggested that primarily, and even exclusively, missionary doctors should give attention only to using their medical expertise, thus building a good relationship with the patients. After that they should hand the patients over to the hospital evangelists for spiritual impact and input. I disagreed, because trust and confidence is not transferable, and because his view countermanded the synergism of this text. It is better to have the doctors also witness to their patients, thereby capitalizing on their relationship and good will in a synergy of integrated impact. Significantly some of those doctors became the best evangelists.

Too often we divide evangelism and nurture, or witness and teaching. But real church growth is like the train running on the twin rails of the railway track. To make genuine disciples both evangelism and nurture must run on parallel rails. We should not stop evangelism to consolidate, nor delay maturation to do broader outreach. To interrupt one or the other creates great inertia, difficult to overcome when trying to restart the evangelistic or the training impetus later. We must do both *simultaneously* so healthy churches can move forward steadily and strongly. This synergistic action calls for and may require some adjustment for the evangelists who have to accept more responsibility in follow up, including baptism and teaching, in order to make disciples who obey in

extending the kingdom both locally and globally. So likewise teachers may need to broaden their parameters of involvement to assure earlier interaction with those seeking the truth, as well as to nurture them to full maturity and continued movement towards that supreme goal of becoming obedient, functioning and reproducing members of Christ's Church.

The Spiraling Centrifugal Extension

A fifth observation indicates a constant spiraling outward interaction of the Church in evangelizing all unreached "*ethne*." The genius of a constant centrifugal expansion revealed Christ's determination to drive the movement of the Gospel ever outward and forward to the ends of the earth. This centrifugal movement was designed to touch each person and reach all families of every generation on the globe until Christ returns. Church planting movements which spawn clusters of indigenous congregations among every distinct people group should define the urgent burden of the churches. Dr. Donald McGavran affirms, "To win the winnable while they are winnable would indeed seem to be an urgent priority [8]. In the early Church God's design was primarily a lay movement, rather than a professional workers' one. So it should be today. The strategic reproductive model already discussed incorporates new converts into God's vital place and plan for making disciples, *panta ta ethne*. The Gospels give significant prominence to this rendezvous in Galilee, commanded and anticipated by Christ, referring to it in no less than six scriptural texts. Alexander Maclaren comments how appropriate it was "that in 'Galilee of the Gentiles,' that outlying and despised province, half heathen in the eyes of the narrow-minded Pharisaic Jerusalem, He should proclaim the widening of His kingdom from Israel to all nations [9]. Matthew 28:16 indicates the eleven disciples, or Apostles, were present at Galilee on this occasion. When they saw Jesus, they fell down and "prostrated" themselves in worship. Many scholars, such as Robert L. Thomas, Stanley N. Gundry [10], Everett F. Harrison [11], and Dr. A.T. Robertson [12] believe that the more than five hundred believing brethren referred to by Paul in I Corinthians 15:6 were also in Galilee on this occasion. So, a host of lay believers heard these potent words of Christ. Dr. Robertson adds a helpful comment about "some who were doubtful" or "divided in mind." He says this refers "not to the eleven, who were all now convinced after some doubt, but to the others present -- over five hundred mentioned above." This would have made Christ's Great Commission have a powerful effect on the lay disciples present, increasing the genius of stimulating a spiraling movement. Even if this model came out of the eleven disciples' compliant ministry alone, it was still a master stroke in strategy.

The Apostles modeled and encouraged this lay pattern through such significant characters as Stephen, Philip, Barnabas and others. Some, like Barnabas, later became apostles. Paul also encouraged the expanding of Christian witness through the use of lay people in mission. His involving of Silas, Timothy, Titus and a host of others is attested to in the New Testament.

Furthermore, the Holy Spirit also had a significant influence in this process, as the first two chapters of Acts show -- sending out the 120 praying disciples as Christ's witnesses

both in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the remotest parts of the earth. But when, after a considerable time passed, the Jewish believers in Jerusalem failed to obey His plan in Acts 1:8, He allowed them to get an involuntary push through the adverse events noted in Acts 8:1. That persecution which arose from the stoning of Stephen scattered all the lay believers abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, while the Apostles remained in Jerusalem. Those who were “scattered abroad went everywhere, preaching the word” [13]. God’s spiraling intent was fulfilled as “churches throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria” arose through the witness of these lay people [14]. Furthermore, those who were “scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen, traveled as far as Phenice, Cyprus and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only.” Some of these laymen of Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch and spoke to the Greeks, preaching Christ. A great number believed and turned to the Lord, causing the church in Jerusalem to send Barnabas up to investigate what was happening at Antioch [15]. The Apostles did not plant the church in Antioch, lay believers from North Africa did. Here is evidence of the spiraling lay movement anticipated by God throughout the extension of the early church. Why is there not more of this exhibited today, particularly in the churches of the West and in the well established churches on scores of mission fields?

The Supernatural Spirituality

A sixth and final observation reminds us that this movement was supremely spiritual and supernatural. Not only was Matthew 28 the climax of the various appearances of Christ in His resurrected body, but it also included the announcement that He had been given all authority and power. The timeless aorist is used here, not the future tense. The disciples were therefore to “make disciples -- *panta ta ethne*.” At its heart, the Great Commission is spiritual -- not humanistic, nor even humanitarian. Its source is supernatural, its energy divinely spiritual. The movement of world evangelism is centered in Christ as the Lord of the Universe, the Lord of the Church [16], and the Lord of the Harvest [17]. His alone is the name that is above every name, and to whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess [18]. The effectiveness of evangelism, mission and church planting is totally dependent on God and the power of His Spirit. This is a timely warning to us in the high tech age of the 21st Century. It should embarrass us when, in our fleshly pride, we think that we are doing God’s work. We are only His instruments, wielded in His hand. As we are humbly yielded to Him, His power operates supernaturally in and through us.

Mission is effective only as He works supernaturally, imbuing the outcomes by His Spirit in transforming human hearts and lives through the blood of Christ, “turning them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God” [19]. This dependence on supernatural sovereignty determines missions’ true character and its effectiveness apart from human effort, human design, human enterprise, and human ability to organize or to meet human objectives, spiritual though they may seem. It is born “not of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” [20].

Isaiah 6:8 shows a paradoxical paradigm of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility. God asks two questions: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” The first is a

question of sovereignty, the second of volunteerism or human responsibility. Significantly Isaiah responds to the two questions in reverse: “Here am I, send me.” He first volunteers and then puts himself under the sovereign direction of God. Mission’s true success then, under God’s superintendence, is accomplished through and to some extent by human agents operating under Christ’s authority, in His power, and through humble obedience to His command. This makes the promise of His constant presence ‘til the end of the age both a positive and an inspiring strength. It energizes us to serve until the completion of His Church’s ingathering, and until the fulfillment of world evangelization among every nation, people, tongue and tribe [21]. Dr. M.R. Vincent wrote that, “the consummation is coincident with the second coming of Christ, after the Gospel shall have been proclaimed throughout the world” [22]. Our Lord Jesus Christ declared, “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” [23]. Truly mission is supremely supernatural and sedulously spiritual.

Conclusion

These six insightful observations set the parameters, the atmosphere and the dynamics for careful missiological application in a world of high technology, in a century of humanly generated unscrupulous pragmatism, and in an age of self focused dependence, often affected by subtle Buddhist influences. These biblical premises send us back to practice the fundamentals. They call all evangelists, teachers, church planters, pastors, seminary professors, and missionaries, to determine to labor under the authority of Christ until His heartbeat for the salvation of all the nations and peoples of the earth is fulfilled. Christ’s words in Matthew 28:18-20 express His Grand Claim of absolute authority, His Great Commission to make disciples of all the “*ethne*,” and His Gracious Comfort as the eternal “I Am,” Who is with us to the end. These observations also remind us to serve in the power of His supernatural Spirit, and to measure our evangelistic and educational successes (if we dare use those terms) by the outcomes of true obedience to Christ’s Great Commission by reproducing godly, functioning disciples and by multiplying churches among all peoples, tongues and tribes. The results of this process of spiraling centrifugal growth are expressed in those multi- cultured believers saved out of the world, incorporated into His Church, and involved in actively helping to gather in His people from *panta ta ethne* -- every nation, people, tongue and tribe. Clearly this is the succinct comprehension of Gospel mission imperatives, both in its puzzling mystery and at its crucial central core as intended in Matthew 28:16-20.

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March 2010

End Notes

- [1] Matthew 28:18
- [2] Matthew 28: 19-20a
- [3] Matthew 28:20b
- [4] McGavran, Donald A. 1980 *Understanding Church Growth*, Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans (p. 92).
- [5] Acts 17:6
- [6] Thayer, Joseph Henry. 1886 *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, New York: American Book Company.
- [7] James 1:22; Matthew 7:23, 26
- [8] *ibid.* (p. 294).
- [9] Maclaren, Alexander. 1910 *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* Chapters XVIII. to XXVIII., New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son (p. 370).
- [10] Thomas, Robert L. and Stanley N. Gundry. 1979 *A Harmony of the Gospels*. Chicago: Moody Press (p. 261).
- [11] Harrison, Everett F. 1962 *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary*. Chicago: Moody Press (p. 111).
- [12] Robertson, Archibald Thomas. 1930 *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 1. Nashville: Broadman Press (p. 244).
- [13] Acts 8:4
- [14] Acts 9:31
- [15] Acts 11:19-23
- [16] Matthew 16:18
- [17] Matthew 9:37-38
- [18] Philippians 2:10-11
- [19] Acts 26:18
- [20] John 1:13
- [21] Revelation 7:9-10
- [22] Vincent, Marvin R. 1946 *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 1. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans (p. 150).
- [23] Matthew 16:18

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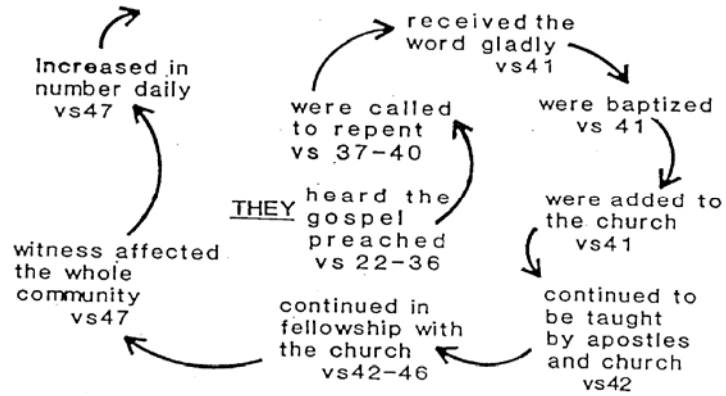


Diagram 1. Acts 2:22-47

CHRIST'S GREAT COMMISSION Matthew 28:18-20



PERSON → PROCESS → PURPOSE

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Diagram 2. Model of Repeated Replication