

The Incorporation and Release of Disciples for Mission in Contemporary North America

ABSTRACT

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This study examines the biblical, contextual and Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) dynamics of making disciples. As such, it attempts to trace how a misunderstanding and disregard of discipleship, along with the impact of the modern era, has impeded the fulfilling of the Lord’s command to make disciples in contemporary North America.

The books of Matthew and Luke-Acts are first discussed in the building of a biblical theology of discipleship. Whereas the Great Commission of Matthew 28:16-20 serves as an index to the missionary discipleship in Matthew, the Nazareth pericope of Luke 4:16-30 acts as a programmatic preface to the proclamation of release for the captives and their incorporation into Christ’s body the church.

Matthew and Luke-Acts are seen as complementary in their desire to unite the early church in its missional concerns. Discipleship is defined as the personal and corporate communion with God through the Word, prayer and worship in order to produce a fruit-filled community of believers who fulfill the Lord’s commission through the Spirit empowered release and incorporation of others.

The contextual component of the study compares and contrasts the close community of disciples of the first century with the emerging individuality of the modern era. The movement of the church to the periphery of the postmodern, secular society is seen as an opportunity for the church to rediscover its missional essence.

The SDA dynamic in discipleship is explored biblically through the study of the potential

role of the Sabbath in making disciples and practically in a survey of a recent large-scale evangelistic campaign in North America. The findings from the survey show that while the revival and reaping aspects of evangelism were strong, the campaign had a limited affect on the addition of truly new members from the community.

The conclusions of the study highlight the importance the Holy Spirit and the Sabbath can have in the incorporation and the release of disciples for mission in contemporary North America.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Disciple making in the New Testament began when Jesus personally chose, mentored, sent and authorized the twelve apostles during His ministry (Mk. 3:14-15). After the resurrection, Jesus specifically commissioned His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. David Bosch maintains that the making of disciples is at the heart of the Great Commission:

The most striking use of the verb *matheteuein* is encountered in the “Great Commission” (28:19). It is also the only instance in which it is used in the imperative sense: *matheteusate*, “make disciples!” It is, moreover, the principal verb in the “Great Commission” and the heart of the commissioning. The two participles “baptizing” and “teaching” are clearly subordinate to “make disciples” and describe the form the disciple-making is to take (1997:73).

The post-resurrection church understood the primacy of making disciples. The individuals who were converted as result of Pentecost were incorporated by the apostles into their discipleship community (Acts 2:42). In addition, Paul stressed the reproductive nature of discipleship (2 Timothy 2:2). It could be said then that the New Testament church attempted to fulfill the Great Commission by incorporating people into the community of believers so they could be discipled and sent forth to disciple others. With this New Testament paradigm in view, how is the church fulfilling the mandate to make disciples today?

A recent survey has found there has been a dramatic increase of spiritual hunger in America (Gallup and Lindsey 1999:1). However, this broad interest in religion has by and large not been translated into a deep, transforming community of faith. The same poll found that America’s faith tends to be non-transformational, uninformed and independent (1999:3).

The most recent research concludes that “faith in America is broad but not deep” (Gallup and Jones 2000:128).

George Barna has found that the long term discipling of new converts is in serious jeopardy. “Studies we have conducted over the past year indicate that a majority of the people who made a first-time ‘decision’ for Christ were no longer connected to a Christian church within just eight weeks of having made such a decision” (1998:2, emphasis his)! “Undisciplined church members present one of the greatest challenges facing the church, not only in the West but around the world” (Gibbs 2000:231).

The Research Problem

The challenge to fulfill the Lord’s commission to make disciples in North America can be traced to both a misunderstanding of the biblical text and the influence of modern society. The central role of making disciples within the Great Commission and the gospel of Matthew has not always been clearly seen (Bosch 1997:55). This at times has led to a distorted understanding of the text which in turn has affected the disciple-making mission of the church.¹

In addition to the misunderstanding of the biblical text, the influence of modern society has separated the individual from the community and pushed the institutional church from the center to the periphery of society.² The creation of the autonomous individual within the North American culture has steadily eroded the role of dynamic discipleship communities. Faith has turned inward and the journey together has been replaced by a very private religion, even within the church.

¹ Bosch argues that when the Great Commission is divorced from its context, it “is easily degraded to a mere slogan, or used as a pretext for what we have in advance decided, perhaps unconsciously, it should mean We then, however, run the risk of doing violence to the text and its intention” (1997:57).

² At the brink of the twenty-first century, the king who knew not Joseph is the collective culture of which we are a part. The combined impact of the Information Age, postmodern thought, globalization, and racial-ethnic pluralism that has seen the demise of the grand American story also has displaced the historic role the church has played in that story. As a result, we are seeing the marginalization of the institutional church (Regele 1995:182).

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church has taken the Great Commission seriously in its missionary efforts. The church has attempted to obey the command to “go” by preaching the gospel “to every nation, tribe, language and people” (Rev. 14:6). The church seeks to “teach” by exposing new converts to the twenty-seven fundamental beliefs of the denomination before they are “baptized.”³

With the church both molded and pushed to the very edge of our increasingly pluralistic, postmodern society, one can legitimately ask just how the church is to fulfill the Great Commission to go and make biblically faithful disciples in North America? This is not only a theoretical question for me but emerged from my own personal conversion some years ago.

Thesis Statement and Research Questions

With the Lord’s commission to make disciples clearly before us, this study seeks to understand how the New Testament practice of making disciples can inform the mission of the church in North America today. More specifically, this study will address the following questions:

1. What is the meaning of missionary discipleship in the Great Commission and the gospel of Matthew?
2. How did the Spirit incorporate people into the community of faith in Luke-Acts?
3. What are the distinctive challenges of making disciples in the evangelical church in contemporary North America?
4. What are the distinctive challenges of making disciples in the SDA Church in contemporary North America?
5. What is the significance of the Sabbath for the teaching and practice of discipleship in contemporary North America?

³ Although there have been a number of denominationally published books in the last decade centering on prayer and small groups, there has been no attempt to integrate the relationship between faith, fruit, discipleship and doctrine.

The dissertation is structured into three major parts and answers each of the research questions raised above. Just how disciples were made in Matthew and Luke-Acts is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 and comprise the first major part of the dissertation. These findings are then synthesized into a biblical theology of discipleship at the end of Chapter 3.

The second part attempts to discuss the issue of contextualization raised in the third research question by giving an overview of the culture of the first century church and how that society compares with the contemporary culture in the making of disciples. A contextual theology of discipleship is presented at the end of the second division.

Once the general biblical and contextual issues of discipleship are discussed, the third part of the dissertation looks at the SDA practice of discipleship through the study of an evangelistic campaign and local SDA churches. After the practice of discipleship is surveyed, the theological meaning of the Sabbath is set forth as it might contribute to the teaching and practice of discipleship for contemporary North America. The material is then summarized in the last chapter and shows how the discussion of the various points have answered the research questions.⁴

The first chapter begins to lay the foundation for forming a biblical theology of discipleship by discussing how the book of Matthew itself informs the making of missionary disciples. It will be found that although the Great Commission in Matthew 28:17-20 has often been cited as a missionary text in the Bible, it has at times been isolated from its immediate context, the gospel of Matthew and from the rest of Scripture as well. The chapter attempts to address this oversight by exploring the missionary intent of each of these contexts and show how missionary disciples are made through the authoritative teaching, sending and sustaining presence of Jesus.

⁴ For the more technical parts of the introduction to the dissertation such as the assumptions and delimitations see Appendix A.

PART I A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF DISCIPLESHIP

These first two chapters discuss the influence Matthew 28:17-20 and Luke 4:16-30 had in the writing of the gospels and the life of the early church. The self-sacrificing life of Jesus is studied as the notebook and training regimen for His disciples. The path of discipleship that the Messiah takes is closely linked to the Old Testament and hence does not initiate a new way of discipleship but restores ancient ways. True discipleship principles will be found to be deeply Christological in nature.

While at the very end of Matthew's gospel the presence of Christ is promised, Luke will leave little doubt from the very beginning of his two volume work that God will continue to be with His people through the unction of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit will be given in order to both unite the community of believers and incorporate others.

As Peter, Paul and others follow in the path of discipleship which Jesus Himself has trod, the same opposition is encountered. Through the sustaining presence of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit, the church is to go forward to make disciples, ever with the hope of the eschatological victory at the end of the age. From the themes discussed within this first part of the dissertation, a biblical theology of discipleship will be synthesized and tentatively defined.

CHAPTER 2

MAKING MISSIONARY DISCIPLES IN MATTHEW

During the last two centuries, the Protestant missionary enterprise has often appealed to Matthew's "Great Commission" in order to inspire and shape its outreach to people across the globe. This modern use of the Great Commission to inspire the church in its mission seems in part to reflect why the gospel of Matthew was originally written.⁵

Although the Great Commission in Matthew 28:17-20 has been one of the most cited missionary texts in the Bible, it has been isolated from its immediate context (van Engen 1996:117), from "the gospel of Matthew as a whole" (Bosch 1997:55) and "from the rest of Scripture as well" (Blauw 1962:85-86).⁶

The purpose of this first chapter is to show how missionary disciples are made through the authoritative teaching, sending, and sustaining presence of Jesus and how this theme is developed within the immediate and overall context of Matthew's gospel.

The Missionary Context of the Great Commission

This first section attempts to show that the Great Commission was not meant to be a mere appendage to the gospel of Matthew but is intimately linked to both the immediate and broader missionary context of the gospel and the rest of Scripture. As such, it serves as an important

⁵ While it is difficult to understand the total historical environment which guided Matthew to write his gospel, Bosch states that "Matthew wrote as a Jew to a predominantly Jewish Christian community" in order to motivate them towards "a missionary involvement with its environment" (1997:55). For a further discussion of Matthew's audience especially as it relates to Luke's constituency see the beginning of Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

⁶ In contrast to the usual isolation of the Great Commission from its biblical context, Blauw contends that the Commission expresses the continuity of God's universal concern with God promised to bless all the nations through Abraham (1962:19). Bosch argues that the Great Commission is intimately linked with the rest of the book of Matthew (1997:57) and Micahel Wilkins has posited that the entire book of Matthew can be viewed as "a manual on discipleship (1988:162).

index to God's whole missionary program which began with Abraham and now climaxes with Christ's command to make disciples of all nations.

The Great Commission is first linked to its immediate context by Matthew's carefully constructed report of the burial and resurrection of Jesus which begins in Matthew 27:55 and culminates with the giving of the Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20. Within this pericope, the contrasts between the disciples of the Pharisees and Jesus are drawn.

The account begins in 27:55-66 with the two groups interaction with Pilate concerning the death and burial of Jesus. Whereas the true disciples are composed of Joseph of Arimathea and the marginalized women from Galilee, the chief priests and the Pharisees from Jerusalem compose the powerful group which oppose them. Whereas Joseph and the women ask to bury the body of Jesus, the Pharisees approach Pilate to send a guard to the tomb in order to guard the body of Jesus.

The contrasting behavior between the two groups continues in 28:1-10 when the women are commissioned by both an angel and Jesus to go and give the disciples the true report about the resurrection. In contrast to the mission given Christ's true disciples the Pharisees in 28:11-15 bribe their disciples (the guards) to go and spread a false report of the resurrection.

The Great Commission itself is linked to these preceding sections by the transitional verse in 28:16. While most of the disciples positively respond to the report of the women by going to the mountain in Galilee in order to receive the Great Commission from Jesus, some of the disciples doubted.⁷ By linking the comment that the report of the soldiers has continued to "this very day" (28:15) with Christ's promise that He would be with His church until the "end of the age" (28:20), Matthew has alluded to the continuing hostility that the true disciples of Christ

⁷ Perhaps Matthew wants to link these doubting disciples to the attempts by the Pharisees (through their disciples, the soldiers) to discredit the resurrection which in turn would destroy the very foundation of the Great Commission. Whereas the gospel of John uses the story of Thomas to reflect the struggles of present and future communities of disciples to believe in the resurrection, Matthew takes the Pharisees commissioning of the soldiers to spread a false report as the context in which the church must operate in the future.

in their mission to make disciples among the nations.⁸ Table 1 gives a summation of how Matthew 28:17-20 is linked to the activities and reports of the burial and resurrection of Jesus.⁹

TABLE 1
THE MISSIONARY CONTEXT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

Event/Time	Pharisees/Chief Priests	Women/Disciples
The Burial of Jesus	The Pharisees came from Jerusalem The Pharisees go to Pilate and ask to guard the body of Jesus.	The women came from Galilee. Joseph goes to Pilate and asks to bury the body of Jesus.
The True and False Commissions	The Pharisees instruct the guards to go and spread a false report of the resurrection.	Jesus instructs the women to go and tell the disciples about the true report of the resurrection.
Forty Days Later and Beyond	The story of a false resurrection is widely spread among the Jews “to this day.” Some doubt Jesus.	The story of the true resurrection is to be spread to all the nations “to the very end of the age.”

The Great Commission is not only linked to its immediate context but Bosch states “that the entire gospel points to these final verses: all the threads woven into the fabric of Matthew, from chapter 1 onward, draw together here” (1997:57). If the major themes in the Great Commission are to be uncovered, then just how these seminal thoughts are defined, developed and synthesized within the book of Matthew itself must be understood. While the rest of the chapter will be devoted to the development of this hypothesis, both the Great Commission and Matthew itself must first be viewed within the wider purpose of God’s missionary intent which began in the Old Testament.

⁸ Whereas in Matthew’s day the fact of the resurrection might have been clouded by gnosticism, the secularism and higher critical theories of the modern era has cast doubt on the resurrection and by extension on the Great Commission itself.

⁹ Within this framework, van Engen has recognized that the Great Commission is actually part of three commissions given within the last chapter of Matthew (1996:117).

The Great Commission is not only linked to its immediate context and the book of Matthew but to the missional intent of God which begins early in the Old Testament.¹⁰ Johannes Blauw has argued that God's universal concern and covenant for humankind is established with Abraham through the promise, "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3).

Here it becomes clear that the whole history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God's dealings with the nations, and that therefore the history of Israel is only to be understood from the unsolved problem of the relation of God to the nations (1962:19, emphasis his).¹¹

However, this separation of Israel to become the people of God was never meant to isolate them from the rest of the nations but rather to foster the centripetal movement of the nations to God's people, city and sanctuary. It is not until the Great Commission of Matthew 28:17-20 that the centrifugal aspect of God's universal concern for the nations is expressed. "For it cannot be denied that here, and for the first time, the commission is given to go out among the nations" (Blauw 1962:86, emphasis his).¹²

Therefore Great Commission expresses the continuity of God's universal concern which began in the Book of Genesis. It signals a clear methodological break between the centripetal motion inherent in the gathering of the nations to Israel and the centrifugal motion of the disciples being scattered to make disciples of the nations.¹³

¹⁰ In the early 1960s Blauw wrote a book entitled, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, which was commissioned by the World Council of Churches to survey and appraise the recent work in Biblical theology about the nature and necessity of the Church's mission. He begins his survey by saying that "the Old Testament can neither be by-passed nor referred to merely by way of introduction" (1962:15). In this respect, the older literature on the Biblical theology of mission in the Old Testament is "constantly disappointing" (1962:15).

¹¹ In this context (cf. the flood, Tower of Babel) of God's universal concern for the nations, "the election of Israel is a matter of divine initiative which has as its goal the recognition of God by all nations over the whole world. The way to this goal is the theocracy of Israel; the means is Israel's separation from the other peoples." (Blauw 1962:24).

¹² Blauw states that the Great Commission emphasizes the universal lordship of the Risen Christ by using the word "all" four times. Jesus has been given all authority, the disciples are to teach all He has commanded, they are to go out to all the nations and He would be with them always, (Greek: all the days). He concludes by saying that "the proclamation of the Gospel is thus the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ among the nations" (1962:84, emphasis his).

¹³ A further link between the Great Commission and the Old Testament is found in the covenantal formula. Meredith G. Kline states that "the incorporation of disciples into the jurisdiction of the New Covenant by baptismal confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is in clear continuity with the tradition of the initiatory oath of allegiance found"

This strong missionary movement is put into effect by the command of the risen Lord to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee. Although it will often be hindered by doubt, both the command and promise of the commission propels and protects his faithful disciples throughout all the nations for all time. As such, the whole foundation of the Great Commission is predicated on both the earthly recognition that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and the heavenly enthronement of Christ as the Son of Man.