

“Omissions from the Great Commission “

By Steve Ramer

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Scripture

Matthew 28:5-10 & 16-20

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Sermon

The passage we just read is commonly called, “The Great Commission” but simply in order to stir up a bit of controversy this morning I will instead entitle my message, “*Omissions from the Great Commission!*” You’ll get the point I think as we go along.

We have several forms of Jesus commissioning his followers in each of the other gospels as well as in the Acts of the Apostles. However, each one of these differ greatly in significant details such as location, timing and the word choices given to Jesus.

But Matthew’s account has always been central to an Anabaptist understanding of what the fellowship of believers is to be about. Historically, for Anabaptists, the only other biblical passages that are more important than this one would be the “Sermon on the Mount” and the passage in Matthew 4 where Jesus’ clearly rejected the use of violence, advocated care for the poor and called for the necessity to love everyone - even one’s enemy! Matthew 4 is a precursor to the Sermon on the Mount but its content Luke included in his rendition of Jesus’ Mountain side message!

Matthew’s version of the “Great Commission” is a clear and concise “job description” for all who truly seek to follow Jesus. Unfortunately we too often miss those succinct crucial instructions. So, allow me this morning in outline fashion to indent and number the four specific tasks Jesus is calling us to do.

I. Make others into disciples or followers.

Depending upon the translation, we are instructed to go and make disciples or followers of Jesus. In essence we are called by Jesus to duplicate ourselves. (Yes, scary I know!)

Now what I am about to say may seem as if I'm splitting hairs, but since I am quickly running out of hairs left to split, I am not! I have spent enough time hanging out with American Fundamentalists, Evangelicals and even some Pentecostals to understand their motivations regarding what seems to be the paramount importance to evangelize and convert the unbelievers.

I know that I am over-simplifying all this and that not all folks under each of those labels, thinks or acts in the same way. But often my initial reaction to such efforts and their subsequent results often strike me as too shallow, if not downright misguided.

First and foremost, discipling and evangelizing are not the same and neither is following vis a vis conversion. Now perhaps this is more of a modern problem since the English word, "evangelism," has its roots in the New Testament Greek word that should be translated simply as, "the good news!" Evangelism, then technically, is merely "telling the good news," which for poor and oppressed people in 1st century Palestine also included simple things like food and justice.

Most early Anabaptists would not have a problem with that broader understanding of evangelism. The problem with conversion as the main goal is Jesus' parable where seed fell on shallow ground and in spite of sprouting earlier and then rapid initial growth faded when the real "heat" was turned up! Whereas following, or being a disciple, early Anabaptists understood was for the long haul.

So, when some of my Christian friends want to talk to me about the need to get out and convert as many souls as possible, I often remind them that Matthew 28 says that our job is not finished when folks convert but when they too become true followers of Jesus, which I might add is a much more labor intensive if not actually more humanizing endeavor!

2. At some point baptize those who are trying to follow.

Of course, for any group named Anabaptist this would certainly be important, no? The very term means "re-baptizer" since folks were being baptized again as adults who had all been baptized earlier as infants.

The term originated in the courtrooms of early 16th century Europe as an accusation of those who had committed the crime of rejecting infant baptism by baptizing adults again. Punishment for such a crime included; arrest, prison, confiscation of property, slavery, exile, torture and death. Internally, it was a means of telling the larger faith community both of one's intention to follow Jesus and to be disciplined by that community.

Curiously what is omitted in Jesus' instructions is both the manner and timing of baptism. In the early church it could take years of instruction before a convert was finally baptized. We are also not told how many times one can or should be baptized nor that the only medium that can be used is water.

Early Anabaptist promoted three forms of baptisms; water, spirit and fire!

Baptisms of the spirit and fire we do not have control over. The Spirit of God chooses when and how to baptize us and all we gotta do is remain faithful, willing and open for this fulfillment. The Baptism of fire or sometimes called martyrdom, arose from the fact that many of the first Anabaptist were arrested, tortured and burned at the stake for attempting to faithfully follow the instructions of Jesus.

Again, we cannot really control if and when the governing authorities might decide to persecute us, all we can do is to remain faithful to Jesus and not be surprised if we suffer unjustly like he did!

We can control the baptism of water so this became a very important ritual, ...that we find a way to get folks wet somehow. Again, how is not spelled out so whether water is sprinkled or poured or whether the follower is dunked under the water once forward or multiple times backwards does not really matter. Sadly, however, only communion, has divided Jesus' followers more than his instructions to baptize. (Seems to me as if something more important has likely been omitted over the years.)

3. Teach and be taught!

Now the Anabaptist take on this could be what modern educational theory has labeled "life-long learning!" Educational theory would also point out that following Jesus means that we follow in both word and deed, which is considered "experiential learning."

Mennonites have certainly struggled over the centuries with hierarchies and authoritarian structures but the ideal has always been, what we call mutual discipleship where each of us teach, support, and hold one another accountable.

But it also must be clear that as we follow Jesus' example, we can never use coercion or enforced rules through violence. Instruction in the way of Jesus, like his healing works, must be a gift freely shared with any who choose to listen! And full participation in the community of those seeking to follow Jesus must be fully voluntary and unlike many baptisms in Christian history never forced at the tip of a sword or gun barrel.

Anabaptists would also say that following Jesus is really hard sometimes and so we cannot do it alone but need the help of the larger community to not only instruct and challenge but to also support, encourage and forgive.

4. Teach the full Jesus!

Specifically, Matthew says, *"teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you..."*, which you might say is not really a separate task but merely a clarification!

Perhaps, but I also think that this is one of the biggest omissions in Jesus' "Great Commission!" True followers must take the scriptures seriously, and for Anabaptists, we do this by study and discernment within the community.

And contrary to some folk's perceptions we have always taken advantage of the latest in Biblical and theological scholarship. Many of the early Anabaptist were highly educated. Some like Menno Simons had been trained as Catholic priests. Others like Michael Sattler were monks who had dedicated their lives to serving the poor and to study. While many more had actually studied in some of the most prestigious colleges throughout Europe.

Of course, like our early Anabaptist fore parents, we too would likely agree that Jesus' wasn't very ambiguous on a couple of things. The necessity of caring for the poor, desiring justice for everyone, living a simple lifestyle, refusal to engage in violence and loving everyone, even those folks who are enemies or who just generally treat us badly!

Things that are perhaps less consistent or clear, we commit ourselves to struggle with the larger community to understand. Which leads me to another specific bone I have to pick

with many American Fundamentalists, Pentecostals and Evangelicals. Many of those folks seem to focus in on and spend a great deal of time and energy on condemning certain people or moral behaviors which Jesus actually said little or nothing about.

And they do this while simultaneously ignoring the teachings of Jesus on things like unequal wealth distribution or the systemic exclusion of those deemed not “pure” enough, which Jesus actually spent most of his time talking about and acting against!

Another failure to teach the complete Jesus that many Christians, including Mennonites, omit is that we too, like Jesus, will likely suffer because of our choices to follow him.

By choosing to follow God’s plans, Jesus was hunted down, arrested, tortured and murdered by the empirical conglomerate of his day. Early Anabaptists not only believed this but they also experienced it personally and thus felt it necessary to tell others to expect the same.

These kinds of beliefs, practices and instructions, are never very popular but especially in our current society. One of the more recent fads in the world of church evangelization and growth is called, “attractional outreach.” Simply put, get folks in the door by any means necessary; rock bands, coffee bars, hip young preachers who sit on a stool and just have conversations instead of sermons. Keep it happy, upbeat and certainly triumphal! And above all avoid politics especially the more revolutionary kind!

Now, of course, none of those things are necessarily wrong, but if that is all there is, then it is incomplete!

The full Jesus must include the Jesus who suffers with the oppressed, lived in contact with the poor, who challenged unjust social structures and was willing to die to redeem the entire world. That full message will likely not attract huge crowds here in America.

But following and loving Jesus is reciprocated by an eternally loving, eternally and truly transcendent caring Jesus. A Jesus who is with us always, even when we suffer or feel rejected by the world around us.

Not a “high-fiving Jesus” with whom we can have a “bromance,” but a Jesus who stoops as low as he needs to go, in order to scoop us out of the gutters we continually seem to get ourselves into! And, according to Matthew, he is with us not just until we finish our life on earth but he is with us until the end of the age!

Hmm... this is the age or period from now until God’s final age when the fullest bringing together of heaven and earth will finally occur and then exist eternally! “To eternity and beyond!” As Buzz Lightyear would say. And yes, I do understand and am intentionally being oxymoronical!

Steve Ramer

Pastor Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship

300 E. Oak St.

Ft. Collins, CO 80524

(970) 412-7510