

# **All Christians are Workers in the Great Commission**

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## **Introduction**

Prior to his ascension into heaven Jesus gave the most important command of his earthly ministry. The effective fulfillment of this command would determine the growth of the kingdom of God in this world. The command, often referred to as the Great Commission is found in Matthew 28:18-20: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.'"<sup>i</sup>

A close reading of the Greek shows that there is really only one command in the Great Commission, that is, the command to make disciples. The word "disciple" means basically a learner, one who accepts the teachers beliefs and life-style. Sometimes in the Bible disciple is used to designate a follower of Jesus, regardless of his commitment (John 6:66). Generally, however, it implies a marked degree of maturity in Christian faith. In this sense a disciple is a dedicated, loving, obedient and fruitful follower of Jesus. Vergil Gerber's definition is as precise as any: "a disciple is a responsible, reproducing Christian."<sup>ii</sup>

Clearly the making of disciples is not an event in peoples' lives. Rather it is a process. I am a disciple when I am living with Jesus and for Jesus, learning from him and reaching out to others because of him.

The making of disciples begins with bringing God's grace to people. This is what we have learned to call evangelism. The authority for doing this is clear from the Great Commission; it is the authority of Jesus Christ. The means by which people are brought into discipleship are unmistakable, God's Word and Baptism. But who is to do this work? What work force is being commissioned?

The answer is that all Christians are commissioned to be a part of the Great Commission. It is to the Church as it is assembled before him, not to a particular segment of the Church, that Jesus is speaking when he gives the Great Commission. Don't mistakenly place emphasis upon the "Go." What the Great Commission is actually saying is "As you go...make disciples." Not many of us will be called to "go" overseas. But all of us are to be involved in making disciples "as we go" in the normal traffic patterns of our lives.

When Jesus gave this command before his ascension, it was not to be an impossible task. The tools for doing the job, God's Word and sacraments, are filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit. The workers Jesus directs to do the job are of sufficient number to reach all people in the world. That remains true today. The more than three billion people of our generation who are heathen can be reached with the Gospel and will be reached with the Gospel when all Christians take seriously the marching orders Jesus gave them. *All Christians are workers in the great commission!*

The work is not being done simply because there are not enough workers doing their job. History and tradition have taken their toll. Not all disciples of our age see themselves as God's ambassadors; and of those who do, not all are willing to go where the action is. Permit me to illustrate these two problems by means of two comparisons with a football team.

In the first, it is time for the game, and the team is standing in a huddle around the coach. A loud cheer goes up from the team as the huddle breaks. The coach trots out onto the field by himself; the team turns around and sits on the bench. We ask one of the players what is going on, and he tells us that the coach is going to play today. "All by himself?" we ask. "Sure, he's got a lot more training and experience than the rest of us. We've got a lot of rookies on the team and we might make a lot of mistakes. Anyway they pay the coach well, and we're all here to support and cheer him on."

We watch as the opposing team kicks off. The coach catches the ball. Valiantly he charges upfield, but is buried under eleven opposing players. He's carried off half-conscious.

That sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Still it is a picture of what is happening in the church. Many members expect the preacher to do the preaching, praying, witnessing and visiting because he's paid to do the Lord's work and he's better trained. Many in the congregation are content to handle non-spiritual jobs like ushering, handling finances, administering the business aspects of the church, cleaning and repairing the buildings etc.

Let's go back to our comparison of the church with a football team. This time the team realizes they are the players, so they're out on the field in their huddle. It's time for the game to begin, but they huddle and huddle and huddle. The referee calls a penalty for delay of game, but they still remain in the huddle. Finally the quarterback trots over to the sidelines to tell us what is happening. "This is the greatest huddle I've ever been in," he explains. "What a group of guys. We have the best fellowship, and some of these guys are amazing students of the playbook. Why, some of them have memorized nearly the whole book. Several fellows have some really good ideas about how the game should be changed too. We're really learning in this huddle."

"But why don't you get up to the line and play?" we ask. "But why should we? When we're really ready, we'll do that. Besides, we might get hurt. In the meantime we're having a good time and anyone is welcome to join us."

There is a real danger that churches can become "holy huddles," Christians who gather faithfully to worship God and study his Word, but they don't scatter into the world to witness God's grace. They may sense that they are to be a part of fulfilling the Great Commission but they don't actively involve themselves in that work.

*All Christians are workers in the great commission.* That Bible truth dare not be denied either by insisting that a few paid professionals in the church do the work or by acknowledging the truth but not actually doing it. When we consider who is to speak God's marvelous Gospel in this world of sin and death, we are considering an extremely important principle. To see its importance let us briefly review how this principle has been applied in the history of the Christian Church and the accompanying results.

## **From Ascension to Twentieth Century**

### **The Early Christian Church**

The early Christian Church is a demonstration of phenomenal expansion of the Gospel. The Book of Acts records for us some truly amazing statistics, first of all, of the church in Jerusalem. As we review what took place it is instructive to note the emphasis of the holy writer Luke upon statistics as celebration to the Lord for the large harvest he was providing. Beginning with Pentecost we read, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (2:41). Within a short period following Pentecost we read, "The Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (2:47). "Many who

heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand” (4:4). “More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (5:14). “So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (6:7).

Very shortly persecution scattered the church of Jerusalem. Acts 8:4 tells us that “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” It is important to note that the antecedent of “those” is not the apostles. After a frightening experience with Peter and the other apostles, the rulers decided to leave them alone for a while. It was the congregation, the lay people, who went everywhere telling the good news of Jesus and with great blessing. The persecution abated and “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord” (9:31).

Other Christians driven from Jerusalem by persecution scattered to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. At first they restricted their evangelism efforts to the Jews. However, some men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and began to tell the Greeks the good news about the Lord Jesus. The result is that “The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (11:21). This combination of preaching to Jews and Greeks in Antioch resulted in such great numbers turning to the Lord that word of it spread to Jerusalem and Barnabus was sent to minister to this congregation. Under his ministry through the congregation “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (11:24). The work became too much for Barnabus so he went to Tarsus to look for Saul and brought him to Antioch. “So for a whole year Barnabus and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were first called Christians at Antioch” (Acts 11:26).

When Paul later came to Ephesus, he found some disciples already there. After three months of teaching in the Synagogue, some of the Jews openly maligned Christ, so Paul and the disciples left and held their daily Bible class in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. For two years this continued and such were the results that in two years we read “that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (19:10). The province of Asia is now the western third of Turkey, an area about the size of Ohio, Indiana and Michigan combined. This entire area was evangelized in two years: Similarly the congregation at Thessalonica evangelized most of Greece (I Thess. 1:8).

A few years after Jesus gave His global evangelizing commission in Palestine, Paul is writing to Christians in Rome (Romans 1:7). Within a short period of time the civilized world around the Mediterranean Sea had become a Christian community. The enemies of the Gospel pay its disciples the highest tribute when they lament: “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here” (Acts 17:6).

All this was done in a society as godless, wicked and anti-Christ as the world has ever known. And all this was done without the printing press, church buildings, seminaries, denominational headquarters, the New Testament (except for a few circulating letters), modern means of mass communications and rapid transportation or a thousand things we think we simply must have. They had none of the modern conveniences but they did the job.

Origin gives us the following picture of mid-third century conditions: “Christians do all in their power to spread the faith over all the world. Some of them therefore make it their business in life to wander not only from city to city but even to villages and hamlets, to win fresh converts for the Lord.”<sup>iii</sup> Most of these itinerant teachers were laymen. The main work of spreading the Gospel was done by the cloud of unknown witnesses, the Christian tradesman and

artisans, the soldiers and slaves, and last, but not least, the Christian women. It was a church of which it was true that if not all, then at least a vast majority, knew that they were witnesses for Christ and were about their calling. K. Strachan writes, “Every disciple according to the gifts received of the Holy Spirit, participated in the task of making Christ known...Deacons are not diverted from witness by other responsibilities; believers are exiled but not deterred from preaching Christ; congregations, like that of Syrian Antioch, launch missionary thrusts; lay people like Priscilla and Aquila convert their homes into centers of evangelistic outreach. This is the picture drawn by Luke of the early Christian disciples.”<sup>iv</sup>

We must avoid the tendency to romanticize these early Christians as though they were a breed of super saints with no weaknesses like ours. They were just ordinary people. After Jesus’ death many of his disciples who had run away when he was arrested fell into complete discouragement. John’s Gospel portrays them gathered together in a room locked for fear of their enemies. They were haunted by memories of their failure and intimidated by the menace of a hostile society. The congregation in Jerusalem quickly faced the problem of members publicly lying, of disputes about equal distribution of goods among the different races. Most of the letters of the New Testament were written to correct errors of doctrine and practice which had become a part of the congregations. The congregation in Corinth, for example, had more problems than a one-armed paper hanger. The church was divided by a party spirit. There were things like spiritual immaturity, immorality, lawsuits between members, wrong ideas about marriage, complaints about paying ministers, jealousy over spiritual gifts, confusion about tongues, and false teaching about the resurrection of the dead.

These Christians and congregation were really no different from us and ours. Their power and our power is that of the Holy Ghost. They were possessed, cleansed, controlled, directed and empowered by the Spirit of the Living God. They were a channel in and through which He could work to reach a world that was lost. They spoke to all the world because the Holy Spirit gave them the words to speak and the boldness to speak them.

They likewise understood that all of them were involved in the mission of evangelizing the world. Everybody did the work of evangelism. The early followers of the Lord saw the Great Commission as a personal directive to each one of them to personally evangelize. They disciplined their converts so that the evangelized were soon evangelizing.

Erwin Lueker in *Change and the Church* writes: “In the discussion of ministry in the New Testament four factors must be borne in mind: (1) All ministry centers in Jesus Christ; (2) the entire Christian community is active in ministry; (3) the ministry is given by God and is exercised through the spontaneous use of special gifts; and (4) special ministries are needed for specific situations in an evolving society.”<sup>v</sup> That type of ministry in the early Christian church produced fabulous results. Had it continued the world today would be undoubtedly much different.

## **The Middle Ages**

However, by 400 A.D., in the three centuries which quickly followed New Testament times, the Church entangled in theological controversy, clerical hierarchy and popularity became almost complete apostate. For the next 1000 years God was almost without a true witness to the Gospel. With the Reformation in the 15<sup>th</sup> century came a rediscovery of the principal truth of the Bible, justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. With that came also a rediscovery of the need to evangelize. Men like Wesley and Whitefield brought a rebirth of one of the New Testament methods of evangelism—mass evangelism. Since those days it has been widely used

with varying responses. But since the third century there has not been a general, widespread return to the New Testament principle of personal evangelism on the part of the entire church.

### **Twentieth Century**

Today there is a renewed emphasis upon total mobilization of the church in middle and South America. The number of Protestant Christians in Latin America has grown from less than two million in 1945 to 19 million as of 1970. In a single year some 3,000 new evangelical congregations were formed in Brazil alone. The most extensive gains have been made by the Pentecostal churches. One million new members were added to their churches in a 10-year period in one country.<sup>vi</sup> The secret of their success is attributed to the immediate enlistment of the new convert in the missionary enterprise. Their aim is not to produce a Sunday Christian, but rather a believer who is able to witness in the society in which he lives.

The story of how the Latin America Mission researched this growth is very interesting. In the mid-1950's Latin America Mission was not doing well. The church was losing ground as each year the population growth far outstripped the growth of the church. The church seemed to be suffering from a sort of deadness. Even though they had doubled the number of missionaries after World War II, there seemed to be no appreciable difference in evangelism. At the same time non-Christian movements such as the Communists were growing. The leaders of Latin America Mission took a long, hard look at these movements to assess their secret of success. They studied the Communist movement, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the one branch of the Christian Church in South America that was actually growing, the Pentecostals. In all cases the one thing which all had in common was the successful mobilization of their entire constituency in continuous outreach. Latin America Mission put their findings together into a concise statement known as the Strachan theorem: "The successful expansion of any movement is in direct proportion to its success in mobilizing and occupying its total membership in constant propagation of its beliefs."<sup>vii</sup>

Very properly we decry the emotionalism and subjectivism which accompanies the Pentecostal movement. Their doctrinal aberration are many and serious. Still we recognize that in applying the principle of the Strachan theorem they multiplied the number of people who were actively sharing their faith. God does want His Church, His whole Church, to speak of Him and for Him in this world, and He does bless such efforts.

We acknowledge that mobilizing the church in constant propagation of its beliefs is Biblical. We preach sermons on the subject and read books about how to do it. Also we acknowledge that we have not begun to see personal evangelism restored to its New Testament place of priority and power in our midst. We have the Gospel! Thank God we have the Gospel! What a power it is and what marvelous things it accomplishes among us. We are truly amazed to see its tremendous results in our efforts to share it. What we genuinely need—and what God is calling us to—is not only the recognition of the truth but also the increased practice of the truth that every Christian is involved in the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Let us consider again the Biblical basis for this.

### **The Biblical Basis**

God gave the early Christian Church the gifts needed to do the job. He continues to supply needed gifts to the Church in all ages, and those gifts are primarily people whom the Holy Spirit endows in various ways so that they are equipped to minister. In the major passages dealing with spiritual gifts Romans 12, I Corinthians 12 and Eph. 4—the context emphasizes the

life of the Christian community which is to be built up through the ministry or service of all of God's gifts.

### **The Ministry of Pastor-Teacher**

Eph. 4:11, 12 lists the gifts God gives for leadership in the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The apostles are traditionally understood to be the 12 disciples; they were sent by Christ to bring the Gospel to the world. Matthias replaced Judas as a primary witness to the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:22, 25). St. Paul designated himself an apostle (I Cor. 15:8-10). The title is also given to Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junias (Rom. 16:7) and James the brother of the Lord (Gal. 1:19). Likewise the traditional understanding of prophets is that they were Christians in the early church who were endowed with the gift of prophecy or the proclamation of the Gospel. The title did not exclude the apostles necessarily.<sup>viii</sup>

For the present we defer consideration of evangelists and go to pastors and teachers. According to most scholars the terms are to be bracketed, intending to denote the same individuals. Pastor means shepherd. The activity set forth in this word is that of feeding God's people with the Word so that they are protected from false teachers and teachings. It implies a leading of God's people in paths of spiritual safety. Teacher relates to a continuation of instruction and building up in faith. The aim of the teacher is not so much to lead as it is to develop within the people of God a desire to follow Christ, to be the kind of people God wants them to be.

The understanding of God's purpose in giving these gifts has been disfigured in the minds of so many Christians because of several commas. "It was he (Christ) who gave some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Eph. 4:11, 12).<sup>ix</sup> This has usually been understood to mean: God gave pastor-teachers to make God's people strong; pastor-teachers are to build up the body of Christ until each member is strong in the faith and is a completed man spiritually. But take out the punctuation! God gave pastor-teachers for building up the people of God for the work of service which the people of God are to do. The people of God are the ministers, the servants! Their service is that they edify, build up the Body of Christ. They lead one another into an ever stronger unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God. As they do so they produce in the church, out of the many different people who belong to it, one mature man, whose shape and pattern is that of Christ Himself, who is the Head of the Church and fills out each individual so that all together become fitted into the pattern of a mutually helpful company.

Ministry in this sense is the work of every Christian. The pastor-teacher, then, is in the business of preparing people for service. The Greek word for "prepare" used by Paul is rich in imagery. It is used to describe the fisherman who mends his torn nets so that the nets are prepared to catch fish. It describes the work of a ship's chandler who fitted out the ship at the dock with sails and rigging, water and stores, and perhaps even a crew, so that it would be ready to make its voyage.

A congregation of Christians is a multifaceted group, whether it is 10 or 1,000. It is the church when individuals sit and listen, when they answer questions or share in worship, and when by faith they serve one another. The pastor-teachers are God's gifts to equip the individual member of the church to render service to others. The tool at their disposal—just as it is the tool at the disposal of the members in their ministry—is the means of grace. The pastor-teacher becomes the energizer and guide of God's people so that as many as possible of them as richly as

possible, fulfill their role in building up the body of Christ. God clearly intends that all his people be involved in ministry as God's priests and ministers.

### **All Christians Are Ministers**

According to prophecy Christ was to have such a following, a priesthood of all believers, who through faith in him would be his own, have free access to God through him, and serve him in holiness and righteousness. All God's people of the New Testament are told, "And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God" (Is. 61:6). In the New Testament we see the fulfillment of this prophecy. The apostle Peter writes: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (I Peter 2:4-5). Several verses later Peter writes, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9).

All who have faith in Jesus Christ as their redeemer have forgiveness of sins and are priests before God. They have free access to God because sin no longer separates them from God. They may approach God personally. The name "priests" belongs to every believer. It is not reserved for any particular order within the Church. And this name is no mere empty title; it gives expression to the rights and powers of God's people. It also reminds them of their duties and responsibilities.

The application of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in the Bible is the designation of all Christians as ministers.

"Ministry" is a translation of a Greek word which basically means "service" or "help." Ministry has been given by Christ to the Church. The Church does not exist for her own purpose but only as the servant of Christ. Writing in *TELL*, John F. Vogt observes, "A quick reading of the numerous Scripture passages where '*diakonia*' (ministry) and its derivatives are found reveals a somewhat startling fact. The word is used as often with reference to lay Christians as it is to someone we'd consider a clergyman or holder of a specific church office."<sup>x</sup>

### **Only Some are Called to be Public Ministers**

At this point it should be noted that there is a Scriptural distinction between the ministry of the clergy and the laity. The work of publicly preaching, teaching and administering the sacraments cannot be carried out by all the church. If every individual Christian insisted that he had the right to preach publicly in the worship service this would lead to strife and confusion. Therefore in his wisdom God has established a public ministry for the public administration of the priestly rites belonging to all believers.

That the public ministry is a divine institution is clearly stated by Paul when he tells the pastors of Ephesus, "Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Paul writes in I Cor. 4:1: "So then men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God." In congregations pastors and teachers are servants of Christ placed into their office by the appointment of Christ. They are to be stewards of the secret things of God, the Gospel in Word and sacraments. These gifts are, of course, given to all Christians, but they are to be publicly administered in congregations by pastors and teachers according to their Call from God. For this reason the term public ministry is applied to such

ministers as pastors and teachers. “Public” is not to be contrasted with private, however. Rather “public” is used in the same sense as in the term “notary public.” He is a notary appointed by the public to do certain work in the name and by the authority of the public.<sup>xi</sup> Likewise public ministers are representative of the Christians through whom they were called. Those who called them are represented by their public ministers when they preach, teach, baptize and administer Lord’s Supper, etc.

In calling pastors and teachers members of our congregations do not give up any of their rights as kings and priests and ministers. They have signed nothing away. Rather they have called these gifts of God into their midst so that they might better be prepared to be God’s ministers.

### **All Christians have the Ministry of Witness**

The ministry of all Christians involves many common roles such as worship, prayer, service and contributions. Also common to each Christian in ministry is the role of witness. While some are called to be pastors, teachers and evangelists, all are called to be witnesses for Christ. The final words of Christ to his Church before his ascension are: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This ministry of witness involves utter commitment to Christ. From the beginning Christ made it clear that witness would involve persecution and death. Hence the call to witness is a call to accept death. Our English word “martyr” is derived from the Greek “witness.”<sup>xii</sup> The connotation is obvious. In a short time, beginning with Stephen, as one after another of the disciples laid down their lives, the term that described their testimony was linked with the idea of martyrdom. Witness as it is brought out in the New Testament involves three elements: demonstration of the Gospel’s power in our lives, verbal proclamation, and inevitable suffering and death.

The Gospel is not merely truth; it is a way and it is a life. Therefore the truth of the Gospel must become flesh in the concrete situations of life. The Gospel will have authority and will command acceptance only as it is translated into deeds and actions. In this sense every one of us is a witness for Christ (either a good witness or a bad witness) because through our actions and attitudes we say a lot about Christianity to those around us.

Our Christian presence in the world, of course, is not enough. Some people say, “You can talk about Jesus Christ if you want. I don’t talk about my faith; I just live it.” That sounds good but it misses two very important points. The first is that none of us is good enough to let just our lives speak for Christ. We have to use words to point beyond ourselves. Second is that Jesus did not stop with presence, even though he was the sinless Son of God. It is worth remembering that it wasn’t until he left his carpenter shop and went out to teach that people heard the good news.

A familiar Chinese proverb says, “A picture is worth a thousand words” but it takes words to tell us that. Christianity is history; it has come down to us by words. Somebody has to write or say the words. There is no Gospel without words, no sacrament either without words, no power and no spirit without words. That’s just the way it is with the Gospel. It is the foolishness of preaching that saves those who believe. The words have to go out to all the earth and to the end of the world.

The verbal witnessing of all Christians is not to be confused with formal sermonizing or to be understood that every Christian must engage in organized evangelism efforts. It calls rather for ready acknowledgement of the Saviorhood and Lordship of Jesus Christ in all the situations



of daily life. It demands the willingness on the part of the Christian to bring Christ into every aspect of daily life. Over and over again the Christian will find himself in situations—times of human need or the lie is spoken—when he is called upon to declare himself as a witness for his Lord. In such moments silence is not golden; it is chicken. It represents betrayal.

Our ministry of witness will bring inevitably suffering and death. It is a paradox that a witness which is a demonstration of love and genuine concern should lead to suffering and death. But this was specifically promised the disciples by Jesus Christ. He said that the servant could not expect to be better than his master. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first,” he said (John 15:18). We are soldiers involved in a life and death struggle and we ought to expect some hardship.

We recognize that suffering is permitted by God because it is valuable to spiritual growth and maturity. We need also recognize that it is essential as part of the witness to be given the world. “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ,” writes Paul, “not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him” (Phil. 1:29). Such suffering will result eventually in death. Whether it be death at the hands of enemies or as the result of lifelong service is a matter of indifference. The important thing is to recognize that suffering and death are essential elements in the witness which we are to give as part of our Christian ministry.

The sectors of life in which Christians are to witness number three. One sector is in the church. We must not say with Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Our duty in this respect is described by Paul in these words: “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing...And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (I Thess. 5:11, 14, 15). The specific aid of such witnessing is indicated by the writer of Hebrews in these words: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10, 24, 25).

In the family, too, Christians are to witness their faith. Parents must be priestly witnesses toward their children, for example. Paul exhorts the Ephesians in this way, “Fathers do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). These words imply a twofold duty on the part of the fathers. First, they must train their children, that is, nourish them with the Word of God. They must also admonish them, that is, set them right with the Word of God.

Martin Luther frequently stressed the duty of Christian parents to be witnessing priests. Each of the chief parts of his catechism had the heading: “As the head of the family should teach them in all simplicity to his household.” He introduced the section on morning and evening prayer with the words: “How the head of the household should teach his family to pray morning and evening.” By repetition Luther taught the responsibility of parents to be ministers in their own household. This is a duty which believing parents cannot evade.

With respect to the world believers have a similar duty to declare the Word of God to unbelievers. As witnessing ministers of God we are to declare Christ to the unbelievers, so that some of these may become believers and ministers of God themselves. Only through the Gospel’s power can this be brought about. Believers are to be God’s ministers to the world by their witness. What else can these words of God mean “that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (I Peter 2:9)? The Great Commission has been given to all Christians to make disciples of all nations.

It is of great importance that Christians confess their faith while in this world. This is evident from the words of Jesus: “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven” (Matthew 10:32, 33). The context shows that Jesus is referring to witness to the world, that is, before those who are able to kill the body but not the soul (vs. 28).

### **Some Christians are to be Evangelists**

While it is Biblical that every Christian is a witness, it is also true that some Christians are to be evangelists. Let us go back to the Eph. 4:11, 12 passage. The description which we read in these verses is not that of offices but rather of gifts which God gives to His Church, “so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12). The “building” which is to take place involves the growing faith of the members of the Church. “Building” also includes adding new members to the Church or new cells to the body. The special gift which God gives to enable the Church to grow in this way is the gift of evangelists.

The word evangelist does not occur often in the Bible. Philip the deacon was called an evangelist (Acts 21:8). Timothy was told to “do the work of an evangelist” (II Tim. 4:5). And in Eph. 4:11 Paul describes the evangelist as one of the gifts Christ has given to the church. However, the verb form of the word appears often in the New Testament. “Euaggelizo,” which basically means to proclaim the good news, is used over fifty times. Angels were said to evangelize when they told the good news of Jesus’ birth (Luke 2:10). Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:14). Paul said that he evangelized the people at Corinth (I Cor. 15:2). The emphasis which he placed upon his work of evangelism is summed up in I Cor. 15:3, 4: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...”

In almost every occasion in which the verb “*euaggelidzo*” is used in the Book of Acts, the context indicates that there was a response to the Gospel. Therefore, it seems that an evangelist is that person who is able to speak about the basics of Law and Gospel to the unchurched in such a way that people are persuaded to come to faith in Christ Jesus. Through the work of the evangelists the Church is built up.

In I Corinthians 12 Paul is describing the Church as the body of Christ. He emphasizes that all believers belong to the same body but that the body has many members. He goes on to say that the members of the body are different, but they are still members of the same body. Paul also stresses the point that even though believers are different from one another and that they do different things, they still need one another. The point is amplified by Paul who writes that those individuals who seem to be unimportant and accomplishing insignificant things could actually be those upon which are bestowed greater honor. God is the one who has given us all our special abilities and our uniqueness and he has placed each of us in the body of the Church just as he desired.

In the making of disciples many gifts are required. The process, however, begins with the out-reach witness of all Christians and the evangelistic activity of the evangelists. An interesting question in this regard is: To how many Christians is the gift of evangelist given?

C. Peter Wagner in his book *Your Church Can Grow* has developed the hypothesis of the ten per cent. He has researched churches for three years and on this basis developed the following hypothesis: “In the average evangelical church, ten percent of the members have been

given the gift of evangelist.”<sup>xiii</sup> He readily recognizes that he has arrived at his conclusion by an empirical method rather than an exegetical one. However, he also points out that when Jesus ascended he left a nuclear group of about 120 committed believers in the Jerusalem congregation. Of them he had carefully selected and trained ten percent—the 12 apostles—for the specific task of propagating the Gospel, while the other 108 had the role of being faithful witnesses, and exercised it. We know how well the church grew with such an arrangement.

From what has been written it is Biblically clear that all Christians have a part, a speaking part, in the Great Commission. The office of pastor-teacher exists for the equipping of God’s people for their service or ministry. A part of that ministry for all Christians is the role of being witnesses of their faith. God also gives to his Church the gift of evangelists for vigorous outreach into the world. The workforce is there. The Great Commission can be fulfilled.

### **Some Practical Applications**

We live in a desperate world. It is a world of over four billion and less than one billion profess to be Christians. Approximately one half of the United States of America makes no profession of membership in a Christian Church. Of those who do, approximately one half are in reality non-members because they never attend. You might picture it this way. As you drive down a street in your town, imagine that all the houses on your left are occupied by those who make no claim of church membership. Imagine that every other house on your right is a household which claims church membership but in reality is not. That’s the situation which currently exists!

In the cities it is worse than in town and country but even there the field is horrendously large. Knowledgeable people estimate town and country to be from 1/4 to 1/3 unchurched. It is so easy to idealize rural and small town living, to think that close to the soil means close to God. That’s simply not true. The auto and super-highway, the supermarket and shopping center, the mail-order house and national advertising, the radio and TV have had a homogenizing influence upon America. Town and country people may insist that they are still “just plain folks,” but the pursuit of pleasure or leisure or the buck, keeping up with the Joneses, the unwillingness to stick the neck out, the cancer of corruption and greed are present everywhere. Whether you are a farmer loading grain or a warehouseman loading a semi, whether you are a small-town merchant or a suburban salesman, whether you drive a mud-streaked pickup down a gravel road or a shiny new car down a 6-lane expressway puts us automatically no closer to God. Sin has infected all of us. Sin has separated all of us by nature from God and there is only one remedy, faith in Jesus Christ. Without that faith the farmer maneuvering his new \$40,000 combine and the pimp maneuvering his girl are one and the same. They are both victims of hopeless living and senseless dying. Victims though they be, they are still responsible. Without Christ they will be brothers in hell.

Realizing the terrible temporal and eternal consequences of sin we thank God that we are reaping a harvest in this world. In celebration of that let me cite some statistics which apply to the Western Wisconsin District. In 1979, 1,548 children and 59 adults were received into God’s kingdom through Holy Baptism. 985 adults were received as communicant members of the district’s 169 congregations—408 as adult confirmands and 577 by affirmation of faith. We rejoice over each and every one of the victories which God in his grace and power has accomplished.

But let’s look at the sober side, too. The Western Wisconsin District membership is 59,951 communicants; 77,902 souls. It has 169 congregations, 44 Christian day schools, 135

pastors, 248 Christian day school teachers. Those statistics impress me! They speak of a large workforce of God's people with excellent potential to serve God in marvelous ways. How do we account, therefore, for the following statistics: a growth in membership of .3% over 1978, a ratio of 147 communicants for each adult confirmation, the loss of 1,250 communicants? How do we explain average Sunday worship attendance being less than 50% and adult Bible Class attendance to be an average of only 3,412 of the district's 59,951 communicants or 5.7%? Figures such as these suggest strongly that we do not see ourselves as God's cutting edge in the world, as partners together with God in the Great Commission. There is much room for witnessing to the world and to our fellow members that can and should be done.

### **Congregation Self-Study**

The participation of our entire congregations in the mission of God needs to be studied. The structures of our congregations and our practice of the ministry need to be re-examined. Congregations and pastors need to make a renewed study of the New Testament concepts of church, ministry and the priesthood of all believers. There are many fine materials to assist in this work. The attached Bibliography lists those I have found useful. One which is suggested as an essential book for beginning such a study is *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth* by Waldo Werning.

Working through problems relating to ministry and mission must not be looked upon as merely an academic exercise. The future of millions around the globe is dependent upon finding correct solutions. Since heresy involves not only wrong teaching of God's Word but also good doctrine which is not practiced, such study is involved also with the issue of faithfulness to our God. Graf in *The Church in the Community* writes: "It is a perversion to structure the congregational organization in such a way as to give the people in the church the routine tasks, that is, the secular operations, technical tasks, while the pastor deals specifically with the Christian work." This is no implication that counting money, bringing the offering plates to the front and cleaning the communion ware is not ministry. They are acts of ministry, but the lay people are capable of much more.

The issue goes much deeper than merely changing the public minister's title from "Reverend" to "Pastor." A congregation which sees itself spoken about by Jesus when he says, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21), will begin to look for additional ways to minister and will begin to put the pressure where it really belongs. Empire building and institutionalism give way when thoughtful people charged with responsibility for the welfare of the church ask and find answers for such basic questions as: (1) What is the mission of the church and the true job of this parish? (2) How can all that is done in this parish promote our true task? (3) To what extent is everything we are doing changing the lives of the people involved? and (4) What is this parish doing to train and involve our members in the true work we have to do? Too seldom are such fundamental questions asked; less seldom are they given satisfactory answers. Such questions open our eyes to the need for developing disciples within the parish and help us see better the field which surrounds the parish. The factory workers and technicians moving into small towns and country-side present many opportunities for ministry. The rural slums and their poverty-stricken inhabitants will become our responsibility.

The end result of such study is that we would no longer speak of a minister and his congregation, but rather of a ministering congregation. It would possibly lead to adopt the following four objectives suggested by Waldo Werning: "(1) Every member is called to Christian witness or service in some capacity according to individual spiritual gifts. (2) This

witness and ministry by believers must be done within the local church. (3) The witness and ministry of the individual through the local congregation should be related to the total witness and ministry of the Body of Christ. (4) The scope of this witness and service in a given area (and ultimately of every country) must encompass the entire area in order to reach every person.”<sup>xiv</sup>

### **Public Ministers as Equippers**

Presently it is primarily true of our congregations that the congregation observes while “the minister” performs his ministry. In addition to conducting worship services and Bible Classes, the pastor is the one who calls on the sick, ministers to the bereaved, edits the church paper, takes charge of the bulletin, drops in on backsliders and, if he has time, visits the unchurched. The Christian day school teachers drive the bus, manage the hot lunch program, and have almost total responsibility for teaching Johnny how to read and how to “pray, praise and give thanks.” If these public ministers do well according to the expectations of the congregation, they are praised for their efforts. If, on the other hand, they perform poorly according to their expectations, they are usually encouraged to minister elsewhere.

Such misguided concepts of the nature of ministry in congregations and schools can create the feeling of constantly being on trial. The insecurity of their position can easily involve public ministers in a power struggle in order to insure their leadership. Some may even begin to look upon themselves as a type of corporation executive and their methods would be perfectly acceptable in the world of big business. Believing strongly in the rights of their own leadership they begin to make their influence felt in all areas of congregational life even to the color of the paint on the walls of the fellowship room or the menu which the ladies are to serve for the banquet.

Another related problem to this wrong concept of the public ministry is the idea that the minister is employed primarily to minister to the congregation. His salary comes from the congregation. The members of the congregation have certain expectations of their ministers, most of which are related to the needs of the congregation. If a pastor fails to call upon a member of the congregation who is in the hospital or if a teacher permits a pupil to neglect his studies, they may be sternly reminded of their failure. On the other hand, both may pass by the home of a poor family with several children attending no Sunday School and be censured by no one.

Because the pressure points upon a pastor and teacher are from within the congregation, and because public ministers, too, are forgiven sinners like all other Christians, pastors, teachers and congregations may succumb to a monastic society, busily and happily ministering to one another with little concern for the spiritual needs of others, aside from making financial contributions for the mission program of Synod. On the other hand, the public ministers may have the genuine heart of evangelists and be almost incapable of finding the needed time to express their concern for the lost. Undeniably the above is a caricature; yet in varying degrees this is what has been and is happening in all of our congregations!

The responsibility of the public ministry, as we have seen, is to equip others to minister. Jay Adams in *Pastoral Leadership* clearly warns the pastor who on his own tries to do the work of an entire congregation:

“1. He fails because he does not have the blessing of Christ upon this program; he has substituted (well-meaningly, perhaps, but none-the-less highhandedly substituted) a human plan for the divine one.

“2. He fails because he does not have the many opportunities and contacts that only the members of his congregation have.

“3. He fails because he spread himself too thin, trying to do too much as one person. It is nothing less than pride for any one individual to think that he is capable of doing what God has said is the work of an entire congregation.

“4. He fails also as a pastor-teacher. In spreading himself so thinly over the works of evangelism as well as that of shepherding and of teaching, he does none of these things well. His sermons suffer, his members are not cared for and even the fruit of the evangelism usually is minimal.

“5. He fails—and this is the most significant failure of all—because, wittingly or unwittingly, he has disobeyed and thereby dishonored the Chief Shepherd by whom he has been ‘given’ to the Church in order to shepherd and teach so that the sheep might discover, develop and deploy their own gifts. Thus he fails to equip each member for his own work of ministry (including the ministry of evangelism, which, in part, belongs to every believer).”<sup>xv</sup>

Coupled with the principle of an equipping ministry is the principle of multiplication.

The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (II Tim. 2:2). It is the principle of multiplication, not addition, which is to direct us. Multiplication of disciples is costly in time and, in the initial stages, much slower than addition, but in the long run it is the most effective way of accomplishing Christ’s Great Commission, and the only way. It takes a tremendous amount of time to train properly faithful people who can carry the training process into succeeding generations. When ever you endeavor to insert a shortcut, you jeopardize the whole process. That is why the ministry of multiplying disciples has never been popular. Everybody likes the results it produces in time, but few are willing to pay the price to obtain the results. It is also true that few public ministers are given the time to begin and develop the process of multiplication of workers. The previously suggested self-study should make possible such a ministry.

### **Christian Education**

The key to mobilization of the congregation rests with proper Christian education. Not merely any kind, but that which develops Christians who have a world vision and commitment. Surely we can state the purpose of our Christian education as the development of Christ-like character in lives. Our focus is to be on changed lives, not on teaching. While the two may sound alike, they aren’t. We tend to equate good lecturing with good teaching, and that often falls far short when we are committed to bringing about change in lives. Ask any parent, good lectures have a limited effect. What we must take as a criteria for effectiveness is “How are people in my class changing?”, not “Now well was I prepared for my class?”

Whether considering our Christian day school or adult Christian education program it is important that we remember that most people are not drawn to an academic study of God’s Word. Most people, young and old, are not able to make the transition from what the Bible says to how to apply it in a particular situation. Most Christians are not students—even those in our schools. Our children are people who are dealing with the problems of quarreling parents, unkind peers, insecurity and questions about where life is heading. Adults, on the other hand, are wrestling with the problems of bringing up teenagers, having aged parents to be concerned about, decisions in business, household budgets, etc. They are concerned with “how is my similar problem working out in your life.” They readily agree God is the answer, but they want and need

the “how to” handles: how to handle my job, how to let my son deal with the neighborhood bully, how to live with a non-Christian husband or wife.

Yes, God does have the answers, but the teacher who is painting even the best picture of Joshua’s attack on the cities of Canaan or the route Paul took on his missionary journeys, without tailoring the lesson to apply to everyday life situations, is far from being the help that is desired by the class member. The teacher must understand that his role is to be a major ingredient in bringing about a Christ-likeness in the class members’ lives. How to pray, how to read my Bible, how to witness, how to develop the right priorities, how to teach my children, how to resist evil and temptation—the list goes on and on.

Within the Christian education program of the congregation it should be determined when and how people will acquire such skills as: being able to read and properly interpret the Bible, develop a devotional life, prayer life, and an ability to verbalize their faith. It should be determined also when it is advantageous to be involved in doctrinal review and when and how a sense of Christian vocation is to be imparted. Christian education should involve itself with the matter of spiritual gifts since the apostle Peter says that all Christians have them: “Each one should, use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (I Peter 4:10). Means should be provided for people to use their gift as a part of their ministry within the congregation.

We need such Christian education because it is through this means that best of all people are moved from being Christian “spectators” to “players.” We need to have Christian education which moves people from Sunday morning worship to small groups, involves them with others, develops a sense of concern for others in their group, helps them better understand the gifts which God has given them and which are to be used in the service of God. It is here that spiritually mature Christians can be developed for leadership and service. It is here that Christians can be incorporated into the Body of Christ as functioning members.

*Disciples Are Made—Not Born* is the interesting title of a book by Walter Henrichsen. While the book has some very good points, possibly its best is its title. The church must concentrate more on developing and building leaders and workers and less upon recruiting. Our failures in development have led us to expansive efforts in recruitment. The emphasis is wrong and needs to be corrected. Let us concentrate more on building people as workers in the Great Commission.

### **Conclusion**

Jesus is the eminent Evangelist and discipler. After spending a night in prayer he selected twelve men from among his disciples to be “apostles” (Luke 6:12, 13). Jesus first instructed them as they followed him in his preaching journeys throughout Palestine and learned by listening and observing. He spent time with them in private. Later he gave them “on-the-job training” by sending them out into towns and villages on missions of preaching and healing (Matt. 10:5ff). Those who had been instructed were now commissioned to proclaim the Gospel to others.

Later Jesus called seventy-two others (Luke 10:1). An increase in his evangelistic outreach required an increase in the number of workers. Again, he followed the practice already established with the apostles. After instruction he sent them out, two by two, into all the towns and villages with a message about the kingdom of God.

When Jesus chose the seventy-two, he repeated his concern for workers in the harvest given earlier to the twelve: “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field” (Luke 10:2). It was when the

seventy-two returned from their evangelism mission with a favorable report that Jesus said, “I saw Satan fall like lightening from heaven” (Luke 10:18).

When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4). Jesus had invested the major portion of his ministry in the discipling of twelve men. Through them the ministry of reconciliation would be carried on. That ministry has come now to us. Our Savior desires to reap a large harvest. He wants his church to grow. He provides the means by which men may be brought into His kingdom—a perfect atonement for the sins of all people, the operation of the Holy Spirit, Baptism, and an inerrant Word. All that is needed is the workers to plant the Seed of the Word, to water and cultivate, and to gather the harvest.

The task is given to all of us who have been captured by faith in Christ. It is not the only task he gives us, but it is always the central one around which our individual lives and corporate lives in the church are to be organized. This is the goal for our lives which Christ has given us. Brethren, pray for workers! As Christians we are all to be workers in the Great Commission.



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<sup>i</sup> NIV, as elsewhere throughout this essay.

<sup>ii</sup> Gerber, Vergil, *God's Way to Keep a Church Going and Growing* (Glendale, Ca.: Regal Books, Division of G/L Publications, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>iii</sup> As quoted by Peace, Richard in *Witness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan), p. 34.

<sup>iv</sup> R. K. Strachan, *The Inescapable Calling* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 60.

<sup>v</sup> Lueker, Erwin L., *Change and the Church* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1969), p. 118.

<sup>vi</sup> Statistics taken from Feucht, Oscar E., *Everyone a Minister* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), Ch. 2.

<sup>vii</sup> Peters, George W., *Saturation Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970), p. 53.

<sup>viii</sup> Caemmerer, Richard A. and Lueker, Erwin L., *Church and Ministry in Transition* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 57.

<sup>ix</sup> In the KJV this passage reads, "And he gave...some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."

<sup>x</sup> John F. Vogt, *TELL*, Winter Issue, 1977, "Who's the Minister Around Here?"

<sup>xi</sup> Vol. 1, *The Abiding Word* (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1955) p. 333, of essay "The Universal Priesthood of All Believers."

<sup>xii</sup> Arndt & Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, pp. 494-5.

<sup>xiii</sup> Wagner, C. Peter, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale, Ca.: Regal Books, Division of G/L Publications, 1976), p. 77.

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<sup>xiv</sup> Werning, Waldo J., *Vision and Strategy for Church Growth* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1977), p. 36.

<sup>xv</sup> Adams, Jay, *Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978, pp. 25-26. Adams also points out that God may still use such a failure to bring many people into His kingdom.