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The Great Commission Inside the Church

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April 16, 2010

The Great Commission Inside The Church



What Can Our Beginnings Teach Us For Our Future?

Most parents try to train their children well. They want to see them grow up well-informed, well-balanced, and good citizens. Imagine how God feels about His children. A system of religious education existed in the Old Testament. Jesus Himself started the training process in the Christian church with His disciples. And He left us with a Great Commission to train God's children as they become adopted into His family and continue to grow.

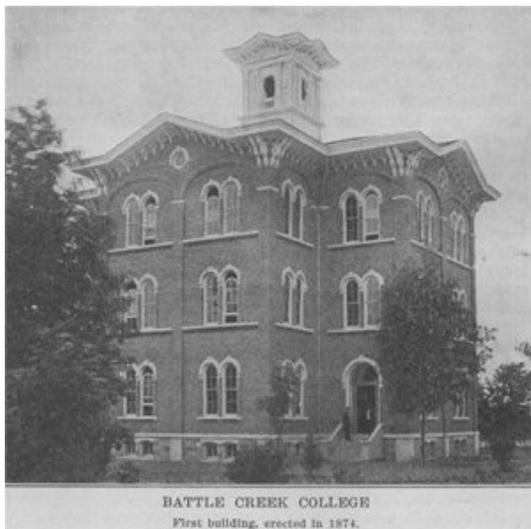
The verbs we associate with Christ's Great Commission are *go*, *preach*, *baptize*, and *teach*. [Mark 16:15-18](#) (KJV) gives a version of the Great Commission that uses the word *preach* [Greek: *kerusso*],

which implies being a public crier of the truth. [Matthew 28:18-20](#) uses the words *teach* [*matheteuo*] and *teaching* [*didasko*], which indicate that we are to make ongoing students, to disciple, and to share information.

Does the New Testament outline a pedagogical methodology for this important teaching? Perhaps not overtly. However, the very use of the word *matheteuo* as opposed to the verb *matheo* (which is not used in the New Testament) indicates that the teaching/learning being described in the Great Commission is one in which the learner does not only take in information, but becomes attached to the teacher and his/her conduct of life. The very verb choice here speaks volumes about potential methodologies as well as teacher qualifications.

Fulfilling The Whole Great Commission

The Adventist church has a program in place for *going*. Our missionary program is unparalleled and is continually being fine-tuned. We also have a program for *preaching* and *baptizing*—ministerial training at many levels, a worldwide satellite program, Internet preaching/evangelism—and all of this is faithfully followed up by *baptizing*, often called *reaping*. Unfortunately we seem much more intentional about publicly crying the truth (preaching) than we do in making disciples and ongoing students (teaching).



So, what exactly has God commissioned us to do?

Seventh-day Adventists have done very well at the commissioned tasks of *going*, *preaching*, and *baptizing*. We also have an inspired and continually growing *teaching* system in our church schools. These are laudable attempts at fulfilling the commission. But as our church grows, we are experiencing a growing disconnect between the two functions. Our international church membership (God's growing family) is rapidly outgrowing any hope of having access, physically or financially, to our church school system.

It is obvious that *teaching* in the Great Commission refers not only to denomination run formal education, but to training people to be well-informed, maturing disciples of Christ and fully functioning Adventist Church members. There is a function of *teaching* that must come not only before, but after *baptizing*, and that is **not** exclusively the function of our church schools.

Otherwise, might not many run the risk of spiritual malnourishment even while being involved in weekly praise and worship, similar to the situation during the Dark Ages?

Current Sources Of Ongoing Teaching

Some of this *teaching* comes to the local church members through the “foolishness of *preaching*” (1 Cor 1:21). But to a church organization that has so much light on the principles of education, we cannot see *preaching* alone as the complete fulfillment of the commission to *teach*. Without a set curriculum for our pastors to follow from the pulpit, preaching does not fill the need for intentional, comprehensive teaching.

Some *teaching* comes to the local church members through the avenue of Sabbath school. However, the subject matter of the adult Bible study guides used in Sabbath school is not decided in a manner that would suggest that it is meant to be an overarching curriculum for the teaching fulfillment of the Great Commission. In fact, the need for ongoing religious education in the church is so little felt that Sabbath school, in many venues, appears to be dying.

What is our system for teaching believers in the local church? Don't God's children need training in such things as how to share their faith; how to function as family-unit witnesses to a splintered world; Christian principles of personal money and possession management; how to involve children and young people in a personal engagement with God and their church; and even facilitating intentional practices that foster the fully reconciled and transformed Christian life?

Intentional Religious Education

Imagine if we added an intentional religious education component to the organizational structure we already use—something transcending the preaching/baptizing ministry and formal Christian education—and planned our fulfillment of the Great Commission from such a paradigm. How much more effective we would be in providing the needed training to our ever-growing church membership?

And, imagine as well, that this education was based on *matheteuo*, discipleship, being in relationship with a teacher, and not simply *matheo*, learning without any attachment. *The methodology*, then, could come straight from Deuteronomy 6:5-9. Those qualified to teach would be those who loved the Lord their God with all their hearts and souls, who had let Him write His law in their hearts, and who were then willing to “teach diligently” the rest of God's children as they all went about their daily lives.

The learning objective of this diligent teaching would be for the students (God's children) “to attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13, NASB). Such intentional discipleship training not only would inform, but also transform God's children. It would prepare them for full citizenship in His kingdom and keep them part of a viable, growing, and united church until He comes to take them home.



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Posted by [Kathy Beagles](#) on April 16, 2010 in [Missions and Ministry](#) | [Permalink](#)

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I like this concept very much, and wonder, given our emphasis on education, why we don't do better at it. I have seen other denominations turn their Sunday school sessions, or Sunday afternoon sessions, into more formal seminar, class like settings where church members can take courses in Old or New Testament, or theology, or even Biblical languages. I'm not sure if this is part of what you are talking about.

In referring to "discipling" you touch on a broader concept than we think of when we say "teaching." The former suggests a kind of ongoing relationship where mentoring and leading by example takes place. This happens infrequently in our churches, and I would like to know what you think can practically be done to improve it.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [April 16, 2010 at 09:48 PM](#)

First of all, I think we should collectively acknowledge the need for more "teaching" to happen in the church. Then, it must be decided what types of teaching will work best in each context. There are lots of things that can be done--one is simply to quit adapting "preaching" as the format for every church event--devotionals, seminars, prayer meetings, etc, and begin to use current "teaching methods" (see Wikipedia) based on educational theory and brain research.

Learner-based teaching methods are a step closer to discipling than is preaching because they are more of a dialogue than a monologue.

Discipling, teaching, and preaching were all done by Jesus. But, I believe they were done in that order of frequency, or perhaps even of importance. After Jesus preached to a multitude, he usually taught his disciples some additional or deeper material. And, their very interest in that teaching was due largely to their relationship with him.

Even if we add good and intentional learner-based teaching in our churches, I believe it will be the "coming alongside" relationships that will interest people in learning more. One qualitative research study done with college freshmen on a Christian campus showed that those students who had an active Bible study and prayer life could point to at least one specific adult in their lives who had themselves been passionate about Bible study and prayer.

Posted by: [Kathy Beagles](#) | [April 16, 2010 at 11:11 PM](#)

It seems to me that discipling refers to the "life together" quality that we ought to experience in the body of Christ. It just occurred to me that the concept of discipleship as a model for religious education is could be problematic in that it can make the student a disciple of the teacher, when in reality the student and the teacher are meant to be disciples of Christ. At least, I assume that what Christ meant by the great commission is that we are to make people his disciples, not ours.

Yet it also seems that the discipleship experience is coextensive with the life of the Christian, which includes teaching and being taught by other Christians. So my question would be How do we teach other Christians in the context of discipleship without making them our own disciples as opposed to Christ's?

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [April 18, 2010 at 12:28 PM](#)

If we make the distinction that we are to make disciples for Christ and not for us then do we not separate ourselves from Christ? If we are in Christ and He in us then aren't those who learn from us the disciples of Christ though us? Who is it that does the work of discipleship? If it is us then we are mistaken because even Christ said it is not He who did the work but the Father. So it should be with us that it is not we who disciple but the Father in us. So to make disciples we are to be of the Father and indeed pick up our cross and

follow Him.

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [April 18, 2010 at 09:05 PM](#)

David, on the question of Christ in us I think scripture is clear, Christ is in the Heavenly Sanctuary and the Holy Spirit is in us. The Holy Spirit is Christ's presence to us, but that does not make us Christ. So, no, I do not think making disciples of ourselves is the same as making disciples of Christ.

The broader theological question you raise is what the role of the church is in bringing Christ to the disciple. The protestant position has been that Christians have direct access to Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The Catholics, since Vatican II, have allowed for this personal dimension as well, but have historically believed that Christ is mediated through the church. And by church they mean the church with an unbroken line of disciple making going back to the 12 and ultimately Jesus. Adventists would say that apostolic succession come to us through the Scriptures and have tended to reduce discipleship to Bible study and prayer. The Catholics would respond that the only ones qualified to interpret scripture are those with the unbroken succession and have tended to reduce discipleship to clergy directed spiritual programs.

My question is, How do we keep our personal relationship with Jesus while at the same time having a corporate relationship with the Body. How do we maintain our discipleship with Christ will being disciplined by (and discipling) others?

Posted by: [David Hamstra](#) | [April 18, 2010 at 10:18 PM](#)

My response would be that we do it with great vulnerability and humility. If we teach "about" Christ, but don't relate that teaching in any way to the process of spiritual growth in our own lives (He has taken my fears, removed my bitterness), then we are not "teaching for discipleship."

If we teach from our own lives without reference to the Spirit's having done great work in them, then we are making disciples to ourselves. (I keep the Sabbath, don't eat meat, so can you.) The idea, as it states in Deuteronomy, is to have something vital happening in our own lives, and then sharing with others what God has done in/for us. Paul stated it in 1 Cor. 1:11--follow me, AS I follow Christ.

As to your question, David, about how we keep our personal relationship with Jesus while at the same time having a corporate relationship with the body--I believe that is a vital question for every follower of Jesus.

Think about the very purpose of the spiritual gifts. Ephesians 4:11 points out that the gifts of apostles, and prophets, and evangelists, and pastors, and teachers is for the equipping (teaching) of the saints . . . to the building up of the body of Christ. That is religious education and discipling--and I don't believe these gifts are given only to full-time paid ministers. The goal of this "equipping" is that "we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ (Eph 4:13). Part of what we will be doing in our disciping (and being disciplined) is "speaking the truth in love" so that we "grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ (v. 15)."

These verses imply to me an element of walking alongside each other, sharing vulnerably from our own spiritual walk, holding one another accountable in love, and ourselves being open and submissive when love-truth is told to us.

Spiritual growth has a corporate element, for at least one reason to help us avoid spiritual pride and pride of opinion. That kind of pride is what leads to intentional, or inadvertent making disciples to ourselves instead of to Christ.

Posted by: [Kathy Beagles](#) | [April 19, 2010 at 11:31 AM](#)

David, your question, "How do we keep our personal relationship with Jesus while at the same time having a corporate relationship with the Body. How do we maintain our discipleship with Christ will being disciplined by (and discipling) others?", is answered by the word we are studying . . . discipleship. If the Spirit of Christ is in us we are both being disciplined by Christ and discipling others. The Spirit works through us to reveal God. Christ was God revealing Himself to us. He sends to us His Spirit that we may reveal Him to the world and in so doing they too receive the Spirit of Christ. Discipleship is the fulfillment of Christ's words when He said, "I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." The relationship of discipleship is the Church and is the Gospel.

Posted by: [David de la Vega](#) | [April 20, 2010 at 08:47 PM](#)

solid comments. but my question is "can teaching be done in the pulpit, if yes, can teaching serve as a substitute for preaching... so will it be correct to say... just teach?"

Posted by: [dwayne](#) | [May 11, 2010 at 02:34 PM](#)

Dwayne: I thought you'd never ask :-)

Actually, I do believe that more teaching should be done from the pulpit, but not all of it should be. Teaching should be "learner-based" and on-going. But, it would take another whole blog to discuss the difference between rhetoric and proclamation, as opposed to teaching, mentoring, discipling. The real on-going work of the church should be teaching, mentoring, discipling--and working together to go out and proclaim the truth to those who haven't heard it.

Another hot topic would be--WHO is supposed to be doing the preaching and/or teaching in the church? That would open up the whole clergy/laity split, and . . . another whole can of worms :-)

Posted by: [Kathy Beagles](#) | [May 11, 2010 at 03:01 PM](#)

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