

1-1-1990

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### Recommended Citation

McRay, Rob (1990) "Does "Go Ye" Really Mean "Go Me"? A Fresh Look at the Great Commission," *Leaven*: Vol. 1: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol1/iss4/3>

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# Does "Go Ye" Really Mean "Go Me?"

## THE GREAT COMMISSION AND THE CHURCH

Rob McRay

The large letters on the V. B. S. banner were unmistakably clear: "Go Ye Means Go Me! The question asked of the children was straightforward: would you "go and preach and make converts and baptize" or would you reject Jesus' direct command? After all, as the old slogan warned, "You can't get into heaven, if you don't take someone with you!"

This interpretation of the Great Commission has been common among many in our churches for decades. The author of one popular manual on personal evangelism asked, "Will Christians be surprised to learn at the judgment that the Lord really meant what He said when He commanded all His followers to 'go' as well as to be 'baptized'"? He further proposed that one reason why there are not more "soulwinners for Jesus" is that "Christians are not convinced that they will be lost if they do not teach others." This interpretation has also seen a renewed emphasis in the so-called "Discipling Movement," led by the Boston Church of Christ and among those influenced by the same sources.

The burden of guilt this movement placed on Christians was too uncomfortable for the vast majority of believers who did not or could not literally fulfill this command. As a result, the Great Commission came to

be reinterpreted in much softer terms as "lifestyle evangelism." "Go Ye" still meant "Go Me"; but sermons would exhort members simply to live good Christian lives and let our lights shine through right conduct. Christians would evangelize their neighbors—preaching not by words but by actions. "Going" was not necessary, since our neighbors were as lost as those overseas. Thus it was possible for people to stay at home, live as they were already living, make no direct effort at reaching their neighbors, and no longer feel guilty—because they were, after all, still personally obeying the Great Commission.

"Go Ye Means Go Me," however, was not the position of Alexander Campbell and other early leaders of the Restoration movement, nor of Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin.<sup>2</sup> "Go Ye," they argued, meant "Go Them." They viewed the Great Commission strictly as a commission given to the apostles and fulfilled by them. The Great Commission is only applicable today to those who are trained, professional evangelists sent out by the church. Thus "Go Ye" also means "Go Professional Missionaries." Many in the churches of Christ today hold this view, if not intentionally, at least in practice.

We must ask, then, "Who is the 'Ye' and what are they commissioned to do?" What did Jesus mean, when he stood on that hill in Galilee and said, "Go make disciples"?

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### The Commission in the Other Gospels

Matthew 28:16–20 is, of course, not the only account of Jesus' giving an evangelistic charge to his followers at the end of his ministry. In Luke–Acts Jesus meets with his chosen apostles and charges them to be his witnesses to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem (Luke 24:33–49; Acts 1:1–8). A promise is also made that the power of the Holy Spirit will be upon them. This charge serves in Luke–Acts to help validate the apostolic witness by grounding it in the specific authorization of the Risen Lord (cf. Acts 10:39–42). The commission also plays a critical role in Luke's presentation of salvation history—Jesus, the savior of all nations, is to be proclaimed to all nations. However, it is interesting to note that in Acts the charge is carried out more by Paul, Philip, and others than by the eleven.

Assuming Mark originally ended at 16:8, then the Gospel did not include any specific final commission to the apostles. However, such a commission is found in the traditions reported in both the short and long endings. The commission in the long ending is especially noteworthy because of its similarities with Matthew, including: the specific reference to the eleven; the grammatical structure of “go and preach”; “into all the world”; baptism; and reference to the Lord's continued presence. Though of doubtful origin, this passage is nonetheless significant in that it, like the account in Luke–Acts, reports an apostolic commission to go out among the nations and preach, accompanied by miraculous signs.

John, in his typically esoteric fashion, states the commission in 15:16 as, “. . . I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. . . .” More plainly in Jesus' prayer for his apostles he declares, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (17:18). The “world” here is neither the globe nor the nations but the world ruled by the evil one, the world of which the disciples are no longer a part (17:14–16). In John 20:19–23, the resurrected Jesus again sends them out, this time with reference to the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sin.

Some often assert, that John 15:1–17 threatens the believer with hellfire should he fail to produce converts. This view is contrary both to the meaning of this passage and to the use of the fruit image in other New Testament passages, not to mention the doctrine of salvation by grace. A comparison of 15:1–17 with 14:10–15 leads to the conclusion that the “fruit” of chapter 15 should be identified with the “greater works” of 14:12. The abiding fruit the apostles were to

produce was the work they did in the name of Jesus; it was the outcome of their ministry. This work will include, but is not limited to, the salvation of those lost in the dark world. The disciples face destruction only if they ceased to abide in Jesus, which would be evidenced by their failure to do the work he empowered them to do.

It is no more true that “the fruit of a Christian is another Christian” than it is true that “the fruit of an apple tree is another apple tree.” The fruit of an apple tree is an apple; and the fruit of a Christian is the character and conduct produced by a repentant heart filled with God's Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

In each of the other three gospels, then, we find an apostolic commission with a clearly missionary character and consistent reference to divine empowering.

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### The Apostolic Commission in Matthew

Turning to Matthew 28, we must first note that one apostolic commission has already been given in 10:1ff. Here the disciples are sent out to preach and heal, but only among the Jews—the Gentiles and Samaritans are expressly excluded. In 24 : 14, Jesus promises that the gospel “will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations” (RSV) before the end comes. Then in 28 : 16ff, the Risen Lord again commissions the apostles to go out and preach; but this time the commission is to all the nations, not just Israel.

“Go” in 28 :19 is a circumstantial participle dependent on the imperative main verb “make disciples.” The emphasis, therefore, is on “make disciples.” Some have suggested that “go” is merely incidental to the thought and should largely be ignored (cf. McNicol, p.38). However, noting the missionary character of the commissions in the other Gospels and in Matthew 10, we must concede that the Great Commission in Matthew is a charge to the apostles to go to all nations and all peoples and preach and teach. The “going,” while not the main point, is nonetheless a significant part of the commission—the apostles are being sent to the Gentiles.<sup>4</sup>

The verb **matheteuo** means more than the KJV's “teach.” It means to “to make a disciple, “to make a follower. “<sup>5</sup> In Matthew “disciple making” means to make someone into one who does the will of the Father (cf. Mat. 7:21; 12:46–50). The “Discipling Movement” has taught that the order of the verbs “make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them” specifies that a person must become a full disciple

before they may be considered a valid candidate for baptism.<sup>6</sup> However, this argument is not consistent with the grammar of the sentence. These are not a sequence of three independent verbs. "Baptizing" and "teaching" are both participles dependent on "make disciples." "The participles are used without any conjunction, which makes their precise relation to the main verb somewhat vague. According to Beasley-Murray (p. 89), the two participles in such a construction do not have the same relation to the main verb. As

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a result, the participles also cannot be understood simply to state the means by which a disciple is made (i. e., "make disciples by baptizing them and by teaching them"; cf. Carson, p. 597). Perhaps it is best to understand "baptizing them" as part of the making of a disciple, and "teaching them" as overlapping but also subsequent to the making of the disciple. In any case, the emphasis is clearly on the call to make disciples, which involves baptizing people into a relationship with God and instructing them in the teachings of the Master.

In maintaining that "Go Ye Means Go Me," some have asserted that "teaching them (new disciples) to obey all I have commanded you" includes teaching them to obey the command to "go and make disciples." Such circular reasoning presses language beyond the normal way of using and understanding universal statements. If a class of graduating teachers were told in their commencement address to "go and teach the children all that we have taught you," they would not understand that to mean "go teach children educational philosophy and methodology or college-level science and math." Nor would they understand that they were to charge the children to "go teach the children." Jesus' charge is that the apostles should "teach the new disciples all that I have commanded you **to teach them**" or "all that I have commanded you **concerning being a disciple.**" The charge is not to "teach the new disciples all that I have commanded you to do," since this would include healing, exorcisms, and other apostolic duties which were not the responsibility of every disciple.

The Great Commission, then, was not given by Jesus as a charge to each individual Christian but as a commission to his specially chosen apostles to go and do that for which they had been chosen and trained and

empowered. Furthermore, a Christian today who simply lives a good life before his neighbors is no more fulfilling the Great Commission than would the apostles have fulfilled it had they remained at home and been good Christian fishermen who rarely, if ever, said a word to their neighbors about their faith, much less tried to teach them. "Lifestyle evangelism" is something of a misnomer. While it is true that evangelism will not be successful without the witness of the Christian life, lifestyle alone is not evangelism. To "evangelize" is, by definition, at least to **proclaim the gospel** if not to produce converts to its message. Without some verbal witness, those who see the good works will not know the God whom they should glorify. Without preaching, they will not know the salvation of Jesus Christ. Without teaching, they will not know what it means to be a disciple. The Great Commission was a commission to preach and teach, not just to live.

### The Great Commission in Matthew

Before we leave Matthew, we must also ask how the Commission functions in Matthew's narrative. Why does the author choose to end his Gospel with these words? Why not include some statement as to the fulfillment of this charge (as in the long ending to Mark and in Luke-Acts), or at least a reference to the ascension? What response is the Great Commission designed to produce in the reader? A nonbeliever would obviously be called to respond to the authority of the Risen Lord by becoming a disciple, being baptized, and seeking the Father's will through Jesus' teachings.

Since Matthew was probably written for disciples, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that the author intended for the believers to hear the charge in some way in their own lives as disciples? A disciple could hardly read this Gospel and arrive at this concluding message without being moved and humbled again by the authority of the Son of God, without being encouraged by the promise of his eternal presence, and without being challenged to learn and do the all that he has commanded. A reader who has himself become a disciple could also not avoid being reminded of the many on the wide path to destruction (7:13) who still need to hear the gospel of the kingdom and to repent (4:17,23) and to become disciples of Jesus. Can a true disciple hear these final words in the Gospel without feeling the call to join in some way in the task of making disciples? How disciples should respond to that call cannot be answered without first considering the evidence of the epistles.

### The Great Commission and the Epistles

Perhaps, for those of us committed to evangelism, the most disturbing aspect of a biblical study of this subject is the virtually complete silence of the epistles. If indeed "Go Ye Means Go Me," how is it that

among the many exhortations concerning the work of the church and the life of the Christian, none of the letters repeat any such commission to evangelize? As David Worley has noted, “‘Light shining’ is the most explicit direct exhortation that you have in Paul’s letters for evangelism.”<sup>7</sup> The speech and conduct of the Christian should have an influence on others (cf. Mat. 5:14–16; Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 4:12; 1 Pet. 2:12–15; 3:15–16; Tit. 2:8,10; etc.). In the New Testament and other early Christian literature there is no evidence that Christians were regularly commanded to evangelize nor that the churches had any organized missionary strategy. The common claims made by proponents of various methodologies that theirs is “the biblical model of evangelism” typically are based on simplistic, uncritical, and often erroneous interpretations of select New Testament passages.

One such claim cites Ephesians 4:11–12 as the New Testament model for growth: “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. . . .” (RSV) The role of church leaders is asserted to be the training (“equipping”) of every Christian to do the work of ministry and to build the church. Thus the passage becomes support for a “Go Ye Means Go Me” philosophy in which all the saints become evangelists and teachers. Certainly church leaders must help prepare others to develop and to use their gifts so that the next generation can continue the church’s work (cf. 2 Tim. 2:2). However, the primary task of the leaders is not to equip leaders to equip leaders. . . . The apostles’ primary task is to fulfill the commission for which they were sent: the prophets, to prophecy; the evangelists, to preach the good news; the shepherds, to tend the flock; and, the teachers, to teach.

These words were not written as a model for church growth but as a comment on the place of the church in the fulfillment of God’s plan to unite Jew and Gentile in one body. Because the church had apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, the saints were completely furnished for the task of building up the body, of building the Gentiles into the household of God (cf. 2:19–22). Other gifts are not mentioned here. However, that each member has a gift is implied in 4:16. When each part of the body, whatever his or her gift might be, used that gift as it was intended to be used, then the body would grow. The point here is that gifts must be used not that gifts must be passed on.

Paul’s consistent emphasis is that some, like himself, have received a special commission and charismatic empowering to do the work of evangelism. Those who support Paul share as partners in his work (Phil. 1:5ff.; 4:10ff.); but not everyone in the church has been given this role. Rather, each in the body has a different role and function. Contrary to the view that

every mature Christian should be able to teach Bible classes and/or to evangelize others, Paul teaches that there are a variety of gifts and only some have the gifts of preaching and teaching (cf. Jam. 3:1). It is the “biblical model” for each to use his or her own gift, not to use someone else’s (so 1 Cor. 12:1–31; Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Pet. 4:10–11).

It is precisely in the use of gifts, however, that we see the role and responsibility of each Christian in fulfilling the work of the church. If the church is to reach the lost, make disciples, instruct the believers, encourage the weak, and minister to the needs of people, then each member must use his or her gift for the good of others. When each body part is doing its job, then the body as a whole can do its job. It is perhaps here that we have most failed to challenge our church members. Members are too often not adequately helped to discover their gifts, nor fervently challenged to use their gifts, nor sufficiently freed by existing leadership structures to develop their gifts and fulfill the roles God has given them.

The gift of contributing is included in Romans 12:4ff. Individuals who have and use this gift can claim not only to be using their gift for the good of the body but also to be sharing as partners with those whom they support. However, I am afraid many of us may have claimed to have the gift of giving, while our giving shows little sign of charismatic endowment. The concept of each having a gift is not an excuse for members to get out of “church work.” Quite the opposite, it is a powerful demand to get busy doing the work each has the call and responsibility to do. The truth is likely that there are many, many more in the church who do have the gifts of teaching and evangelism than have been willing to admit it, permitted to realize it, or challenged to do something about it.

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In Acts and the Epistles, the actual work of the Great Commission is seen to be the responsibility of the apostles and, with them, of those fellow workers who are given the gifts to be evangelists and teachers. Christians given other gifts are not commissioned to become apostles, evangelists, or missionaries, nor even commanded to teach their neighbors but, rather, to influence others for Christ and to work diligently to

help build up the body.

### **The Great Commission and the Church: "Go Ye" Means "Go Us"**

The Great Commission as it was given by Jesus was an apostolic charge to carry out an evangelistic mission in the world. Implicit within the mission, however, is a demand that cannot be limited to that first small group. A universal message demands a universal mission. A message for all people of all nations must be delivered to all people of all nations.

But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? (Rom. 10:14–15 RSV.)

The Great Commission was not a charge to each individual Christian ("Go Ye Means Me"); nor was the task limited only to the eleven ("Go Ye Means Go Them"). The commission continues to be the responsibility of the church ("Go Ye Means Go Us") as each uses his or her gift to help the church accomplish its mission.

The charge delivered at the close of the gospel of Matthew presents marching orders for the church—**make followers of Jesus**. The task is not merely to proclaim the gospel, nor to produce growing churches, but to bring people into the kingdom of God and make them disciples of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> A church which grows because it is meeting the real needs of people is fulfilling a biblical responsibility, but it is not necessarily making disciples. If it grows without calling people to change, keep Jesus' teachings, be self-sacrificing, and serve others, then it is not making disciples. Similarly, a church which ministers to people and calls them to discipleship is not necessarily reaching the lost with the gospel. Part of the commission is to preach, to baptize, to bring people to repentance and faith. We cannot claim to be making disciples if we baptize many, but they never become true disciples; nor can we claim to be evangelizing if we only make better disciples of someone else's converts.

Accomplishing this mission will require those given the gifts of preaching, teaching, and shepherding to rise up and use their gifts. It will require all Christians to support them in their work. And it will require every disciple to use whatever gifts he or she has been given to serve God and others and to build up the church.

Pragmatists may protest that if we do not have a command that each Christian must evangelize his neighbors, the people will not do the work. We must respond that, no matter how powerful a motivation might be, we cannot produce a command where scripture has none. Neither can we transform the Great Commission into something it was not. We can place only those demands upon each Christian which the scriptures clearly place.

Each Christian, no matter what his or her gift, must serve God wholeheartedly, be loving and kind, help the poor, be constant in prayer, be devoted to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship and the breaking of bread, live a life worthy of our calling, be zealous for good deeds, and put on a new nature. Each Christian must live and speak in such a way as to clearly demonstrate the morals and values and truths of the faith.

Every Christian is not required to be a missionary, or preacher, or elder, or personal evangelist. However, every Christian who is given such gifts is expected to use them. And each Christian, no matter the gift, can also join the demoniac in telling "how much Jesus had done for him" (Luke 8:39); each can join Andrew in bringing friends and family to see what he or she has found (John 1:41-42); and, each can be ready when challenged to testify to his or her faith (I Pet. 3:15-16; Mat. 10:32-33).

We must motivate our people, not with fear of being lost, but with a love for the lost and hurting in the world. We must help them to testify to their faith joyfully and confidently. We must be the kind of churches to which they will want to bring friends and acquaintances. And we must call every Christian to share in the work of the church, to be a functioning part of the body, and to dedicate time, service, and possessions to the joint task of making disciples of Jesus Christ. In this way, we will rightfully and faithfully carry out the Great Commission of our Lord.