

The Task God Gave Us!

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Do you believe God exists?

Most of you would say "yes".

Do you believe that because of sin the human race is alienated from God and deserving of destruction?

Do you believe God came to this earth in the person of his Son to save his people from their sin?

Now the next isn't a trick question but listen carefully:

Do you believe that while Jesus was still here on earth, he finished the task of saving everyone he intended to save?

He certainly provided the basis for the salvation of his people, namely his death for us, **but did he then actually save **everyone who would be saved?****

I think most would say "Of course not".

Jesus did save some at that time but his intention was that many more would be saved in the years to come before he returns to earth.

Why are some churches involved so heavily in world missions?

The Apostle Paul answered the question when he wrote to the Romans 10:13-15 "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent?"

It's really quite straightforward isn't it: Only through Jesus can people

know God, have his life and live forever in his presence.

And God has determined that those who know him are the ones to tell those who don't.

Jesus said to his first followers, who knew much about fishing, "**Follow** me and I will make you fishers **of men!**"

After he had spent 3 years with them he commissioned them with these words: Acts 1:8 "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The Apostle Paul later took that commission, that already implicitly applied to all of us, and made it explicit when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20,

"God has given us the ministry of reconciliation: namely that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God was making his appeal through us."

"Those who know God, telling those who don't," has always been God's way.

It has been that way for over 2000 years.

Think back to the first Israelites: God did not save the Israelites, primarily for privilege, he called them for service.

God said to Abraham Genesis 12:1-2 "I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

They were called to make God known among the nations.

- Israel was to demonstrate a right relationship with God and each other.
- Israel was to be a missionary people - proclaiming their God to the ends of the earth - to all the nations.

From the beginning, God's heart has been for the whole world!

But again and again God's people failed to be the light God called them to be.

Then we come to the New Testament.

Look with me please at Matthew 5:14-16.

Now God himself, came to earth in the person of His SON - Jesus.

Here's the way he said it: "**You** are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven."

Jesus then established a new people to be a light to the nations. He established his church.

Look with me at I Peter 2:9-12.

Using language strikingly similar to the language used of Israel when she had been called to be God's light to the nations, The Apostle Peter tells the purpose of God's church on earth: "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 wonderful light... Live such good lives among the pagans (the nations) that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" - that is when Jesus comes again.

The Church has not been called primarily to privilege - we have been called to serve.

- Christians are called to be living demonstrations of the way God created us to be - rightly related to God and to each other.
- The church has been called to be a missionary people - proclaiming our God to the ends of the earth.

And so God the Son said in Matthew 28:19-20

"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 am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I want you to imagine yourself a Christ-follower standing there the day Jesus ascended into heaven several days after his resurrection.

Suppose you heard him say to you, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of

the earth." And to you he said, "Make disciples of all nations." Suppose after he left you looked at the other Christ-followers and said, "Was he serious?"

"Did he mean that it is our responsibility to let people everywhere know about him?"

And then together you answer - "Yes, he was serious and yes, he said it to us.

And then imagine you went back to town, sat down in one of your homes and you said, "O.K. so what do we do?"

At that point one of you speaks up and says, "I know what to do.

We all join the rebel political party, overthrow the Romans and then take over country and make laws that proclaim Christianity the law of the land."

Another jumps up and says "Yes, and we'll make any other religion illegal and severely punish any one who doesn't join the church and live like a Christian."

But another one of the group speaks up and says, "I don't think that's the way to do it at all. I think we are called to love people, to help them and win their hearts for Jesus.

"But what about the people in Samaria?" another says. "How do we get the message to them?"

"Yes, and the ones in Rome and even Spain or even India?" adds another.

But someone else weighs in, "Wait a minute, we can't be worried about the Romans or the Indians - look at all the lost people there are right here in Jerusalem!"

At that one of the leaders intervened, "**It seems to me that we are unclear about just what it is we are supposed to be doing and how we are to go about doing it.**"

"I'd like us to back up for a minute and look carefully at what God has specifically asked us to do.

"Let's see if there are any principles that will guide us in the way we carry out his command to be witnesses to all nations."

Where do we start?

Many of us are tempted to say the task Jesus gave the church is so large we can't possibly accomplish it.

We'll just do a little something so at least we can say we tried and hope that's good enough.

But was Jesus serious when he looked at that small group of believers that day and said, "you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth?"

What is it exactly they, and we, are supposed to do?

Please look again at Matthew 28:19-20.

What does Jesus say he wants them to do?

"Make disciples of all nations".

Yes, he defines that disciple-making process as baptizing and teaching and we will come back to that in a few minutes but lets look at where disciples are to come from: "all nations."

Does "making disciples of all nations" mean that every person on earth will eventually become a disciple of Jesus Christ?

No. We know that many have and will reject God and spend eternity separated from him.

But that does not mean Jesus sent his followers on a mission he knew was impossible!

Thus it is fair to say that Jesus does not mean, in Matthew 28, that the task is to make every person on earth into a disciple.

What does he mean then?

Is this just his way of saying, "witness to as many people as you can?"

No. Jesus is not being imprecise with his language.

When Jesus said, "make disciples of all nations" the word "nations" that Jesus uses is a word from which we get our word "ethnic".

When we think of an "ethnic" group we think of a group of people who

Share a common ancestry, culture and language.

Oftentimes people with a common ancestry will in fact form nations, political areas made up largely of only those of their same ancestral, linguistic and cultural background.

That happened in the former Yugoslavia several years ago.

New political entities (nations we call them) were formed around ethnic groups.

The Muslims contrasted with the Croats contrasted with the Serbs.

Yes sometimes ethnic groups, people groups, will form into political nations.

But other times people with a common ancestry will be part of a larger political area, even with others of a totally different ancestry.

Many Native Americans are obviously part of the U.S. but have a different language and a different culture and in fact are part of a different people group.

We speak of the Sioux "nation" or the Arapahoe "nation", or the Cherokee nation."

That word "nation" is what I'm talking about – people with a distinct culture, language and ancestry.

That's what Jesus is referring to in Matthew 28:19-20 when he talks about making disciples "OF ALL NATIONS" that is "all people groups".

Again, "Is Jesus saying that our task is to make a disciple of every person everywhere?"

Or that our task is to make as many disciples as we can from wherever?

No. His commission is specific - make disciples, Christ-followers, of all nations.

God wants disciples from every people group on earth.

And he has commissioned us to reach every people group on earth and make disciples of those God is calling to himself.

I want you to look again at Genesis 12:1-2.

God's intention was not just to save Abraham and his descendants but through Abraham to bless who? "All peoples on earth will be

blessed through you."

That word "peoples" is not singular, not all "people" as in every person, but all "peoples" (plural).

That word is most other times translated "tribes" or as we would call them - "people groups".

In fact when that commission and promise are repeated in Genesis 18:18 the word used is translated the same way as Matthew 28:19-20 - "ethnic" - people group.

It is not that Abraham will be a blessing to every person who will ever live but that God's people will be the means God will use to bring His blessing to every people group of the world.

Just before God gave his promise to Abraham in chapter 12 about blessing all nations, God does an interesting thing.

In chapter 10 he lists all the people groups of the world.

From the very beginning God's intention has been to call and make disciples out of every nation or people group in the world.

The commission Jesus gave his disciples in Matthew 28 was not simply to evangelize as many people as possible but much more specifically to make disciples out of **every people group** in the world.

To corroborate this, look with me at Revelation 7:9.

In this passage, with which many of you are quite familiar, Jesus is seated on his throne at the end of the age and standing before his throne are who?

They are a great multitude from where?

From every "nation, tribe, people and language."

From one end of the Bible to the other God makes it plain that he intends to call out men and women from every people group in the world.

In fact turn to Matthew 24:14.

Jesus is talking about the signs of the end of this age - when this life as we know it will be over and he will come again to usher in the age to come.

What does he say will mark the end of this age?

The "gospel of the Kingdom" will be preached as a testimony

to "all nations" (the same word). And then the end will come. When it comes to the task of World Evangelization it is **not just a matter of evangelizing or witnessing to as many people as possible** but it is more specifically and strategically **making disciples in all the people groups of the world.** - That is Jesus' command to us.

I'd like you to see this practiced by the Apostle Paul.

Look please at Romans 15:19b where Paul, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ."

Now verses 23-24 "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain."

How could Paul say this?

Has Paul witnessed to every person "from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum?"

Has every person become a disciple?

What then had Paul completed?

He had brought the gospel to those **people groups.**

He had established the church in those people groups.

So where does he want to go next?

He wants to establish or strengthen the church in **another** people group.

All of this has implications for our church's missions strategy.

To be faithful to the commission God has given us it is not enough for us to evangelize only among Americans.

We have a responsibility to God for every people group of the world.

We may not be able to accomplish it alone but we nonetheless bear the responsibility with others to see that it gets done.

Therefore we will send missionaries, we will support missionaries with our prayer and our money and our care - because they are an extension of us - **our** means of responding to the commission Jesus has given **us** to make disciples of **all** people groups.

Would you please look with me again at Matthew 28:19-20

But I want you to see something else about this task Jesus has given us in this text and elsewhere; something else that impacts our missions' strategy.

What is it we are to do among all the people groups of the world?

We are to **make disciples!**

Remember earlier I said that even this text helps us understand what a disciple is.

A disciple is one who has not only been converted but has been baptized into the body of Christ and taught and trained how to be obedient to Jesus.

Please look at Acts 14:21-23.

When Paul was being obedient to that command of the Lord what did he do?

Yes, he evangelized, he witnessed to the saving grace of God and led men and women to saving faith in Jesus.

But what did he always do with those converts?

He formed them into churches!

If you study the book of Acts and read the letters of the Apostle Paul and others - you will always find that **they did not consider the commission of our Lord fulfilled until** in each of those people groups **the church** was established and it was strong.

Look at Acts 15:36,41 "Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing... He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

Did Paul consider his task done when he won a convert and helped that person grow in his or her understanding of obedience to Christ?

No. The task wasn't done until he had established a local church - a healthy church able to start other churches.

It is not enough for us today to only win converts and think we are faithful to the commission.

Unless a church is established in those people groups we have not done what our Lord commanded.

The implications of this principle for our missions outreach are great.

To be true to Jesus' command we will not place priority on evangelism alone.

We will not send evangelistic teams to other people groups and call that as strategically important as establishing and strengthening the local church in that people group.

We will not send teams to build hospitals, church buildings, or feed the poor and call that as strategically important as establishing and strengthening the local church in that people group.

Just getting as many people saved as possible is not a responsible fulfillment of the great commission.

Therefore our missions' strategy will place highest priority on establishing and strengthening the church in as many people groups as possible.

Does that suggest that some people are more important to God than others?

You might think, "I thought God loved everyone equally – so what difference would it make if the next person who became a Christian was from Timbuktu or from the house next door?"

Isn't God just interested in getting as many people saved as possible?

No. Every person IS equally important to God but not every person is equally strategic.

Think of it this way:

If you wanted to sell Starbucks Coffee everywhere in the world, would you do it best by trying to sell to every American first before branching out to other people groups?

No, you would go to the other people groups as well and establish a sales team and then let them reach their own people.

It would be much more effective in the long run.

If God's goal is to make disciples in every people group of the world, it will be much more effective if while we are reaching our own people group we are also establishing beachheads in every other people group in the world.

Then as we help those churches grow stronger, they will be able to reach their own people group much more effectively than we ever could.

Yes, God is interested in every person but He has determined that the way, everyone he has called to be his own will be reached, is by establishing and strengthening local churches in every people group of the world.

In our church, we take Christ's commission seriously.

We want to use our resources most strategically to accomplish the mission Jesus has given us.

It is for these reasons we think carefully about where and how we deploy our missionaries.

There are 6 billion people in the world:

2 billion are in people groups where there is NO CHURCH.

Someone from another people group has to cross geographical, cultural and language barriers to tell them about Jesus.

The need is for evangelism, church planting and Bible translation.

2 billion are in people groups where there is only a FLEDGLING CHURCH.

The Christians and churches are so few and so weak that they need outside assistance in helping the church to become strong enough to reach its own people group effectively.

The need is for leadership development, literature, etc.

In addition to these missionaries who are serving where there is either NO CHURCH or only a FLEDGLING CHURCH we have other missionaries who provide essential support to those in church planting and leadership

development.

Without those support services, many of our other missionaries couldn't stay in service.

A front-line army can't operate without a supply line and other logistical support.

Here are some examples: Many people groups won't allow Christian missionaries; communist and Islamic countries usually won't.

Some of our support missionaries have to provide the business or education platform that allows church planters and leadership developers to stay in those "closed" countries.

Other support missionaries of ours provide education for missionary children whose parents couldn't continue working among people groups if their children didn't have access to education.

Still others provide administrative and technical support for missionaries serving in church planting and leadership development.

Jesus said it, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (people groups) and then the end will come."

What is exciting is that we know how many people groups there are in this world.

It is a finite number.

We know in which people groups there is a strong, reproducing church movement such as there is in the United States, South Korea, much of Latin America and Europe, and many people groups across Africa.

We will not send our people and our resources to those peoples, not because there aren't many unsaved people there, but because the church in those people groups has sufficient strength to share the good news with their own people group.

We know in which people groups there are no Christians or so few that there is not even yet a church established.

And we know in what people groups the churches are so few and weak that they desperately need outside assistance.

Those are the places where we will invest our resources.

And you and I are his means to do it.

We wish to send out three more missionary families in the next six months

Some of you give substantially and faithfully to support our existing
missionary staff.

What we need is the rest of you to help us.

This is about "shaping eternity."

Look at the inside of the mission brochure you were given as you
came today.

Does it grip you as it does me? This is a phenomenal thing
God is allowing us to do – to be involved strategically in much
of the world.

Oh, I am not suggesting for a minute that we can program this thing, and
fund this thing and strategize in such a way that we can finish this task by
ourselves or even with every other church helping us - apart from the
power and working of the Holy Spirit of God.

To be certain, only God's Spirit can give spiritual life,
only God's Spirit can cause spiritual growth to take place in a person.

But God has promised his Spirit.

He told those first followers of his and it applies to us as well,

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you
and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in Judea and
Samaria and to the ends of the earth" - to every people group.