

ARTICLE 7

Mission of the Church

The Great Commission and the Great Commandment

We believe the good news of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is for all people. Christ commands the church to make disciples of all nations by calling people to repent, and by baptizing and teaching them to obey Jesus. Jesus teaches that disciples are to love God and neighbour by telling the good news and by doing acts of love and compassion.

The Witness

The Holy Spirit empowers every Christian to witness to God's salvation. The church as a body witnesses to God's reign in the world. By its life as a redeemed and separated community, the church reveals God's saving purposes to the world.

Matthew 5:13-16; 22:34-40; 28:18-20; Mark 1:15; 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37; 24:45-49; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16-18; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 3:10-11.

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COMMENTARY

The redemptive design of both the Old and New Testament finds its continuance and fulfillment in the mission of the church. The Old Testament prepares the stage for Christ's mission. The New Testament Gospels take us through the events of Christ's life and teaching, death and resurrection, which lead up to the mission assignment of making disciples of all nations. The book of Acts and the Epistles tell the story of how the church implements the Great Commission. The primary task of the Christian church from its inception has been the propagation of the gospel to the ends of the earth, as exemplified by the New Testament church.

God's Mission Design for the Church

There are various biblical descriptions that help focus God's mission design for the church. Metaphors such as being salt, light, a fragrance, or an open letter strongly suggest having an impact within one's sphere of influence. Metaphors of action such as being ambassadors, witnesses, reconcilers, fishers of men, and co-labourers with God help clarify God's design for believers. Descriptions such as the Jerusalem church growing in numbers daily (Acts 2:41), the Antioch church seeing great numbers of people turning to the Lord (Acts 11:21), and the Thessalonian church having their faith in God known everywhere (1 Thessalonians 1:8) help to focus on the mission of the church. Paul's teaching to the Ephesians to prepare God's people for active mission with all the gifts of Christ's body (Ephesians 4:11-12) gives support to the missional design of the church.

Effective mission involves both word and deed. The scriptural design for representing God's kingdom connects the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) with the Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). In both the Old and New Testament, God's people are known for their expressions of love and kindness within a society of poverty, injustice, and hopelessness. God's people are mandated to live within a covenant relationship where God is our God and we are His people demonstrating grace, justice, faith, and works.

The Mission in Preparation

The mission mandate known as the Great Commission was given after Christ rose from the dead. The content of the mandate was not new to

the followers of Christ. When Christ called his disciples to follow him, he indicated that they would become fishers of men (Mark 2:17). Later he gave them power and authority over demons and sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (Luke 9:5-6). The seed thoughts of the Great Commission were also clearly evident in Christ's prayer for the believers in the world (John 17).

When Christ gave the mandate to make disciples of all nations, he gave meaning to the gospel both in words and by example and declared the cost of following and serving him. Christ was a model to his disciples in how he interacted with people, including the poor, the rich, the helpless, the sick, the prominent, the curious masses, and the hidden individuals. Christ was their model in lifestyle witness.

The Mission Declared

The Great Commission mandate (Matthew 28:18-20) is a victory statement that flows from the lips of Christ who had just overcome the world of sin and death through his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. It is now possible for the entire world to be saved, hence the command, "Go and make disciples of all nations." This Great Commission statement has been hailed as the great missionary charter and the church's mission statement since the first century. The Great Commission brings focus to the church's life and work in a number of ways:

It declares Christ as having all authority over heaven and earth, qualifying him to give the mission assignment to the church. No other authority can challenge Christ the King.

It clarifies the mission results in terms of disciples made. The task is to make disciples who will disciple others. There is a commitment implied that involves serious followership.

It commands the mission assignment to be worldwide. All people are to be gathered into the kingdom regardless of race. It is an all-inclusive mission vision with no limits or exceptions.

It assigns mission responsibility and initiative to all believers. Everyone who believes is expected to be a witness and a discipler.

It expects the believers to be identified by baptism. The Great Commission makes baptism a sign of Christian discipleship. It signals sincerity and commitment to the kingdom body.

It describes the new followers as learners and practitioners of the faith. A life of Christian discipleship is profiled in the Great Commission mandate.

It promises Christ's partnership and presence in the implementation of the worldwide mission assignment, until the very end. Christ remains vitally connected as the Saviour and the inspiration in the midst of the church's mission assignment.

The Great Commission starts with Christ's authority and concludes with Christ's continuous presence. This non-negotiable assignment is to be carried out worldwide by all those who belong to Christ. The assignment is clearly focused in its purpose of making disciples or diligent followers of Christ. The primary motive for this mission assignment is not so much the plight of the unconverted or the eternal blessing of the believer. Its primary motive is the church's calling to love neighbours and to make disciples of all nations.

The Mission Implemented

The Scriptures expect the church to be involved in redemptive action in society as a sign of God's kingdom in the world. The body of Christ authenticates its faith through an integrated witness of deeds and words.

The Witness of Commitment:

Holy life in community is a powerful witness. When society sees the church living as a transformed community in the world, the church is being faithful to Jesus' description of believers as salt and light (Matthew 5:14-16). Simple obedience to the Scriptures through lives of devotion, worship, and faith gives credibility to the Christian life. The steadfast faithfulness of the church disarms and impacts would-be critics who are looking for inconsistencies among Christians. This witness of faithfulness is the first step in fulfilling the Great Commission.

The Witness of Love:

A very practical part of living out our faith is that of loving our neighbour (Mark 12:31). This witness of Christian love as commanded by Christ is a powerful representation of God's love for the world. Our love needs to find practical expressions in our neighbourhoods, workplaces, and homes. The body of Christ demonstrates its faith through deeds of love and the generous giving of self to the interests of others.

When the world observes the faith community showing concern and compassion by protecting the vulnerable, defending the powerless, and helping the poor and hurting, they have truly expressed the heartbeat that Christ had for the underprivileged. Christ provides a paradigm for the church to follow his example of caring for the needy, feeding the hungry, liberating the captives, and healing the sick (Luke 4:18-19).

The Witness of Community:

The corporate life of the church is in itself a powerful witness to the watching world. As the church functions in unity and love, it reflects the image of God. The daily life of the body of Christ is a fragrance to others (2 Corinthians 2:15). The unity of the church attracts (John 17:23). In a word-weary society, authentic expressions of joy, fellowship, and worship have great impact. Caring and praying are two further dimensions of community witness.

The Witness of Peace:

The community of faith is also about showing redemptive love within a society of alienation and violence. Kingdom characteristics express themselves through acts of peace and justice. Christians need to stand on the side of those who are disadvantaged and discouraged. Peaceful alternatives to violence and actions to defend the powerless become statements of love and goodness in themselves. Followers of Christ the Prince of Peace must also be expressions of peace in their world.

The Witness of Words:

The Spirit of God empowers the body of Christ to speak boldly regarding the good news of Christ (Acts 1:5). Personal stories and testimonies of changed lives are very powerful. The church gathered also needs to present a clear statement of what Christ came to do for humankind. Each Christian has a story to tell of how Christ forgives sin and gives new purpose and meaning for life. The combined witness of the church body and of individual Christians is what the world needs to hear (2 Corinthians 3:2). The witness of words flows with power when joined with the other aspects of witness. For our witness to be fruitful it needs to be integrated into all of life. Not that our works save us (Ephesians 2:5), but our deeds will identify the genuineness of our faith when we appear before God to receive our rewards (Matthew 25:31-46).

The Mission Requirements

For the church of Christ to be effective in the implementation of the Great Commission, it needs to align itself with the biblical requirements for effective

outreach. The records of Scripture provide a number of indispensable realities for fruitful witness and evangelism.

Empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8):

It is the Spirit of God that empowers the believer for witness. The Spirit guides, enlightens, reminds, convicts, intercedes, and provides new life. The Spirit also opens witnessing doors and makes us attractive and effective through the fruit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts.

Confidence in the Gospel (Romans 1:16; 10:17):

Effective witness is the result of being confident that the gospel is the power of God for salvation. The gospel of Jesus as the only Saviour who can forgive sins is good news. Faith comes from hearing the word. Therefore, we are not ashamed of the gospel.

Unity and Love Among Believers (John 17:23; Ephesians 4):

Christ made it clear that love and unity among believers is a powerful incentive for people to come to Christ. A disruptive or disunited church has little to offer a seeking world. Love and unity have evangelistic drawing power for which Christ prayed.

Faithful Obedience to Christ (John 15; Galatians 5):

Christ links fruitfulness to faithfulness. If Christians remain in the vine and keep connected to the Lord, they will experience joy and answers to their prayers. Christlikeness through keeping in step with the Spirit brings power to our life of words and deeds. Witness is destroyed through lack of integrity but enhanced through prayer and faith.

Love Relationships (Luke 10:27; Mark 12:31):

Loving one's neighbour is the main bridge to winning people to Christ. Expressions of love through deeds of kindness create an environment for effective relationships. When those in the church show love, care, and respect for others around them, they reflect the spirit of Christ.

Priority for the Church (John 20:21-23):

As Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, so the church has been sent on a redemptive mission. This priority must be expressed both individually and corporately. The church has no more right to keep the faith to itself than individuals have the right to live selfishly. At the corporate level, the church takes responsibility to provide opportunities for the world to hear and respond to the message of Christ.

The Mission Urgencies

Christ presented the mission of the church with a sense of urgency. There are a number of realities that motivate the church to faithfulness in its mission:

People are redeemable. God loves the world and wants all people to have eternal life and to live a life empowered by His purpose and presence. People can be set free and given a life of joy, peace, and purpose (John 3:16; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

There is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only way to the Father. Christians are called to proclaim Christ as the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6; Acts 16:31).

People are lost and condemned in their sins without salvation in Christ. The good news is that Jesus has died for our sins and offers forgiveness as a free gift to all who believe (Romans 3:23; 5:1).

To make disciples is a command of Christ. The will of God is for the world to hear and believe. The primary task for the believing world is to make Christ known among all the nations. The mission of Jesus has become the mission priority of every church (Matthew 28:18-20).

The day of the Lord is coming and only those who have accepted Christ are assured of life eternal. There is an urgency of time in preparing to meet our God (1 Corinthians 15:50-58).

Conclusion

Even though our witness for Christ is expressed in various ways, both corporately and individually we have a clear redemptive purpose. The gospel of God's kingdom finds complete fulfillment in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

The following perspectives may be helpful in our understanding of the mission of the church. First, conversion is not an end in itself. We are admonished by the apostle John, “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6). Disciple making is described as “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matthew 28:20). The evangelistic task must never be separated from the nurturing task. Healthy churches empower people to use their gifts both in outreach and in nurture. Christians are to be both salt and light in the world (Matthew 5:13-16).

Second, contrary to popular perceptions, the call of Jesus is not merely an individualistic call to salvation. Rather, it includes a call to join “the company of the committed,” to become a member of the body, to share in the “fellowship of the saints.” This corporate dimension dare not be omitted in our shattered individualistic world. It is the testimony of God’s presence and rule in the world.

Third, this corporate dimension is also vital to evangelism. It is the church that offers the context for evangelism. How the members of the body relate to one another, how they live out their faith, provides a powerful witness. It creates a plausibility structure out of which unbelievers can make sense of the gospel. It offers the world an alternative society, one in which the gospel is actively worked out.

A Temptation to Specialize

In an age of individualism and specialization, deference to the “expert” tempts us to relegate the execution of the Great Commission to those designated by the church for that purpose. In our tradition, this includes those called evangelists, missionaries, and pastors.

While we must recognize the special giftedness of designated servants, we must insist that the commission includes all those who claim to follow Jesus. Indeed, our history as a denomination and as members of the wider Anabaptist tradition is one marked by missionary zeal shared by a broad spectrum of people.

It is vital that we regain the zeal of our spiritual ancestors who understood the requirements of personal holiness to include speaking the words of the gospel and living out its implications in everyday life. It may be that the current reliance on the trained expert has its origin in our preoccupation

with technique. A witness, however, is simply one who tells what he or she knows. Effective witness is found not in technique but in faithfulness, consistent living, and the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

An Exclusive and Inclusive Message

Given the increased attraction of universalism, we must insist on the exclusive way of salvation. “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NRSV). We must resist the impulse to accommodate this focus to the pluralism of our world.

We do well to remember that the call to new life in Christ is also inclusive. It is to “all who receive him.” We must take care to remember the admonition of the apostle that the dividing wall has been broken down (Ephesians 2:14). It would be good for congregations to take a more serious look at where they are located. The homogenous principle of the church growth movement tends to justify where and how we do church. How might we be more faithful in bringing the good news to the “least of these”?

Diversity needs to involve more than “separate but equal” congregations in the denomination. Individual congregations need to demonstrate that the social, racial, economic, and gender walls have indeed been broken down. Even when our culture teaches that only separate but equal multiculturalism works, we must demonstrate that God’s reconciling love brings every variety of people together to love and care for one another. This unity in diversity becomes the hallmark of a vibrant, witnessing community of faith.

The mission of the church needs to find expression in the daily life of the local church. Mission should be revealed in the atmosphere of the church gathered and scattered. As a people whose purpose is built around good news, we believers should live joyful, hope-filled lives. People arriving at a worship service have reason to expect the event to radiate faith, hope, and love. The mission of “good news” should be reflected in every way possible.

A Two-Part Call

Mennonite Brethren Christians can enjoy a unique position in the wider Christian community when they understand the gospel in terms of both evangelism and social concern. We must without reservation call people to repentance and reformation of life in Jesus. We must be clear and culturally accessible in this proclamation and live out the social implications of the good news by caring for those in need and proclaiming God’s peace and justice in the wider community.

The news of God’s reconciling love is holistic, encompassing spiritual, social, relational, and physical aspects of human experience. The atonement

that Jesus accomplished was to redeem the spiritual and physical creation. As ambassadors of reconciliation, we proclaim in word and deed the all-encompassing nature of Christ's redemptive power. We must give the cup of water and we must do it in Jesus' name!

Historically, Mennonite Brethren have been leaders in cooperative ventures to meet physical needs in Christ's name. Although structures are changing, the strong tradition of cooperating with other Anabaptist denominations in the work of Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service, Mennonite Mutual Aid, Mennonite Economic Development Associates, and the like needs to be continued. Loving neighbour and obeying the lordship of Christ involves both communicating God's love verbally and demonstrating it through our actions (Matthew 25:31-46).

Growing a Healthy Church

We can accomplish the church's mission only to the extent that the church itself is healthy. Mennonite Brethren use various tools to encourage congregational health. Essential elements for healthy congregational life include empowering leadership, gift-oriented ministry, passionate spirituality, functional structures, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-oriented evangelism, and loving relationships. A leadership team that knows where the congregation should be going provides visionary leadership. Leaders call out people for active ministry, motivate them, and equip them for ministry. This mobilization of gifts encourages members to use the gifts they have to do the work they enjoy most and can do most effectively.

The decisive factor in congregational health is passionate spirituality. When Christians live their faith enthusiastically and with growing commitment, the church grows in health. Inspiring worship is characterized by active participation by the people, whether the forms are more liturgical or free, more contemporary or traditional. Growing congregations use small groups to provide a secure environment, personal relationships, and the opportunity to share spiritual experiences. These small groups enable brothers and sisters in the faith to grow as disciples. Evangelism that uses as its starting point the needs of the people who are to be reached is relational evangelism. This does not negate the theocentricity of evangelism, calling people to submit to God's sovereignty, but understands that the gospel addresses all aspects of life. In growing churches, the relationships of people to one another are characterized by a high degree of love and caring for those inside and outside the church.

A Vision as Wide as the World

Historically, we have defined ourselves as a missionary movement. This over-arching theme has inspired great missionary endeavours around the world. It may also explain why the “Mission Church” is considerably larger than the “Sending Church.” As a denomination, we have consistently shown ourselves ready to pledge our lives and our fortunes to spreading the gospel around the globe. Indeed, some of us may have done this to the exclusion of our responsibility to take the good news to our own neighbours and those who are different from us in our own community.

Here again, we must emphasize the multifaceted nature of our commission. “As you are going, make disciples...” is probably the correct reading of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). If so, the responsibility falls on all of us wherever we are going. Because the call to follow Jesus is to all, however, we must not lose the urgency of sending credible witnesses not only to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, but also to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It is the responsibility of the local church to foster compassion for those in need, a vision for the lost world, a prayer focus for mission workers and the world, and a plan for sending workers into mission (Matthew 9:35-10:1).