

Matthew 28:18-20
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Hampton Baptist
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“The Heartbeat of Being a Baptist”

William Carey, attending the Ministers Fraternal of the Northampton Association in 1787, proposed a topic for discussion: “Whether the command given the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world.” John Ryland, Sr. responded, “Sit down, young man. You are an enthusiast! When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without consulting you or me.”

At the association meeting at Nottingham five years later, Carey preached a sermon from Isaiah 54:2 with the theme, “Expect great things *from* God; attempt great things *for* God.” People were moved by the sermon, but it appeared that the presiding officer, Andrew Fuller, would dismiss the assembly with no specific action being taken. Carey tugged at Fuller’s coat and implored, “Oh sir, is nothing to be done? Is nothing again to be done?”

The plea was a turning point. The association adopted a resolution, “Resolved, that a plan be prepared against the next Minister’s meeting in Kettering, for forming a Baptist society for propagating the gospel among the Heathen.” The Baptist missionary movement was born. (C. Doug Weaver. A Cloud of Witnesses., Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1993. p. 97)

Missions is at the heart of what it means to be a Baptist. Baptists believe the gospel calls each person to salvation *and* to mission. Since everyone is equal before God and there are no intermediaries between the individual and God (priesthood of all believers), *every* convert is also responsible for being God’s agent on earth. God deals with us individually. We interpret Scripture individually without outside coercion.

We are given free will to make decisions: the most important of which would be the decision of whether to accept or to refuse Christ as our Savior. But part of that free will equation also includes responsibility. We have to depend on the Holy Spirit for guidance in interpreting the Bible; we simply cannot *create* beliefs on our own. We have to be responsible in our belief system. And we have to be responsive to the mandate given to us by Jesus when He said to go and make disciples. It is the responsibility of every believer to tell others about Jesus. Missions and evangelism are not the jobs of a select few. In other words, church members aren’t any less responsible for sharing God’s love with others than the preacher is. *Every* believer is called to some kind of mission or ministry.

We know our New Testament Lesson as the Great Commission; it has been called the “Magna Carta” of Christian witness. Because of the Baptist emphasis on the need for personal conversion in every individual life, these verses stand out as an imperative to make sure everyone receives the opportunity to hear of Jesus Christ and can come into a meaningful relationship with God. Missions and evangelism are the responsibility of every believer. Paul said it this way in his letter to the Church at Rome, “How can people have faith in the Lord and ask him to save them, if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear, unless someone tells them? And how can anyone tell them without being sent by the Lord?” (Romans 10:14-15a) As Christians we are to tell others about Jesus.

Most Baptists have heard the words of Jesus from our focal text over and over. Like me, you may have memorized them in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School as a child. But

reading and remembering the verses are not the same as *applying* the verses to our lives.

Let's look at the context of the passage. Jesus had just been crucified and resurrected. He had appeared to the women at the tomb and had told them to gather the disciples in Galilee for a meeting. It was more than 60 miles from the city of Jerusalem to the southern border of the province of Galilee. Mary Magdalene and the other women certainly did as was instructed them, because Matthew records that eleven of the twelve disciples went to the mountain top. Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus, had already committed suicide. The disciples had forsaken Jesus in his hour of need. John was the only one of the twelve who was at the cross when Jesus died. The others had fled or watched from a distance. But now, the risen Jesus had requested their presence in the province where he conducted most of his ministry.

And to the ones who had abandoned their leader, Matthew records that Jesus said, "All authority has been given to me—not just on heaven but on earth as well." By his resurrection, he had *proven* that he had *heavenly* authority; the powers of death were not even great enough to keep Jesus in the tomb. But Jesus also had access to *earthly* power. He told them that he would make this same power available to them. If the finality of death could be overcome, nothing else could stop them.

Jesus then told them to *go*. Many of the disciples were from Galilee; they had fished the great Sea of Galilee, and it was home for them. But Jesus told them to leave their comfort zone of home and the familiar, and go to the people of all nations. Remember, as Jews, they were under Roman domination; the Romans were despised by the average Jew. But Jesus was calling them to go to *all* nations. He was directing his comments to the individuals; it was not a message intended for just some of them. It was personalized. It was if he was saying, "You go . . ."

Knowing they had access to the power of God, they were told to go. Like an envoy of a king or an ambassador of a president, the disciples could venture into the world. But instead of carrying the temporal seal of a nation or the signature of a mortal leader, they carried the seal of God's eternal love and the signature of the everlasting sacrifice of the cross. Only with that kind of power could they undertake such an incredible task. Again consider the situation. Jesus commanded eleven uneducated men to begin a spiritual revolution throughout the entire world. To many, it may seem the height of foolishness, except for one mitigating factor; one cannot underestimate the power of God. (*Celebrate Freedom, VBS Guidebook*. Macon: Smyth & Helwys. 1998, p. 48)

They were instructed to make disciples. How would they do that? They had to tell the story of Jesus, which is evangelism. They had to place God's love into action, which is missions. They could not wait for the known world to come to Galilee; they had to *go and make disciples*. Could God have done it without them? Certainly, because God is all powerful. But because of the notion of free will, the message of Jesus had to be *carried*. And the most effective means possible was and is through personal testimony. The disciples had first-hand encounters with Jesus. They could tell others how he healed people; they could recall his teachings; they could tell the story of how Jesus was raised from the dead. One has to *experience* the risen Christ before one can *tell* of the risen Christ.

They were instructed to make disciples, meaning students, followers or imitators of a master teacher. Some during the Crusades of the Middle Ages became confused with Jesus' words when he said *to make disciples*. Remember, belief is voluntary; one cannot *make* another truly believe anything.

The way for people to know Jesus was to be through the lives and actions of the disciples. They were to tell and show people about Jesus. In so doing, then the individuals were to make their own choice of whether to accept or reject Christ as their Savior. Whether the person accepts or rejects is left up to him/her. But it is our responsibility to tell and show them.

We are all called to be evangelists and missionaries. An evangelist is a person who tells others about Jesus, while a missionary shows the love of God and tells about it. Given those definitions, we are all to be evangelists and missionaries. The eleven disciples certainly took Jesus' word to heart.

They evangelized the known world. They faced persecution because of their efforts, but they knew that God had all authority. They realized that what they were doing was what Jesus had asked them to do.

Jesus told them to baptize the new disciples. The baptism would identify them as Christians. Remember that in the New Testament world, baptism often brought hardship, at times even persecution. It symbolized a person's decision to give up other religions to embrace Jesus as Lord. It gave visible evidence that a person had seriously adopted a new way of life (Ibid., p. 48)

In making disciples, followers were to do what Jesus had done and to obey his teaching. In so doing, they would become disciples. Jesus had commanded his disciples to love, to serve, to sacrifice, to live by the Spirit rather than by the law, to pray and to live as people of faith. Now he called on his disciples to carry this message into the world. (Ibid., p. 48)

Having given the mandate, Jesus offered one final word of comfort. He promised to stay with those who did his work. "And remember, I will be with you all the time, even to the end." Like a parent assuring a small child, Jesus assured his disciples. They wouldn't go anywhere, do or say anything, alone. He would always be there. Although they would face mistreatment, imprisonment, beatings, and even martyrdom, Jesus would never leave them.

When the messenger appeared to Joseph prophesying of Jesus' impending birth, the name mentioned for the Son of God was "Emmanuel," which meant "God with us." Matthew began his gospel with the promise of the presence of God, and he closed his story of Jesus with the same promise. No matter what happened, God's presence would be with them.

Keith Parks, former Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board President and retired Missions Coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, told of a time when the door was open for the advance of the gospel, but Christians failed to respond. He said, "In 1258, the fate of Islam hung by a thread, and only Egypt was strong. The great Mongul empire, led by Kublai Khan sent word by Marco Polo for the Christian Church in Rome to send one hundred men to teach Christianity to his court. It could have been a turning point in the history of the religions of the world. But the Christians were so busy fighting among themselves that it was twenty-eight years before one, not one hundred, reached the great court. Already retired, the great Kublai Khan said, "It is too late. I have grown too old in my idolatry." (Cloud, p. 52-53)

What kind of message are we sending to our community? As individuals, each of us are called to tell others about Jesus. You don't have to be able to recite verses from the Bible to tell someone about Jesus. If he lives in your heart, tell someone what Jesus means to you. Offer your story of how you accepted Christ; recall the promises that Jesus grants you, peace which you cannot understand, grace that you don't deserve, love that is endless, and forgiveness that is unearned.

Missions and evangelism are the heartbeat of being a Baptist. Do you realize what a privilege we have in freely telling others about Jesus? Do you realize what an honor it is personally to assist someone who is poor? God has blessed us with the freedom to choose, but the flip-side of that coin is labeled responsibility. Although we are not responsible for the salvation of others, we *are* responsible for going and telling others about Jesus. We are responsible for going and showing others God's love.

As a missional congregation, Hampton Baptist remains actively involved in going and showing God's love. Some of our recent options of going and showing God's love include our Soup Kitchen; A Night's Welcome; Lincoln Park lunches; tutoring; food collection; Souper Bowl of Caring; socks and towels; Sports Camps; Bay Days; Happy Class; Supplies for Belize including a laptop, a printer and even a school bus; Mission trips to Belize, Hurricane-ravaged southern Mississippi; Appalachia; Washington, D.C.; Raleigh-Durham; Coastal South Carolina.

Our Woman's Missionary Union shows God's love through the Seafarer's Center; Prayer Shawls; Rescue Mission; Prison Ministry; Youth Challenge; Transitions; Baptist Campus Ministries at Christopher Newport University and William and Mary; Bible distribution; books for inner city children in Orlando.

Recognizing that more can be accomplished by working together than working alone, we share God's love through financial contributions to our ministry partners: Baptist Joint Committee for Public Affairs; Peninsula Baptist Association; Downtown Hampton Child Development Center; Baptist World Alliance; Peninsula Pastoral Counseling Center; HELP; Food Bank; Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond; and the Vietnamese Congregation.

A percentage of all undesignated money given each Sunday goes to missions around the globe through the Baptist General Association of Virginia and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Giving money for world hunger and the other missions offerings we support provide avenues of service to places we will never visit. Giving money and supplying items for church emphases are great opportunities, but they should never take the place of being *personally* involved.

This week, we have opportunity to share the love of God with children in our Vacation Bible School. Most of the attenders will be our own church children. What a grand opportunity we have to invite and bring children who don't go to church at all, who don't know the love of God as we do. Let me encourage you to go and invite children to our VBS.

Touching a child who is lonely, gazing in the eyes of someone who is hungry, praying with someone who is lost are privileged experiences. I encourage you to continue to give monetarily and otherwise to our missions emphases. But don't rob yourself of the myriad of opportunities to help someone on a personal basis. Two thousand years ago, Jesus told his eleven disciples to go and make disciples. Today, Jesus continues to tell us to go and make disciples. It is the heartbeat of being a Baptist.