

Toward a More Effective Great Commission Strategy

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By

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Evangelicals have a great heritage of inviting people to faith in Jesus. However, our experience of following Jesus' command to teach these converts to obey all that he commanded isn't as remarkable. In terms of practice – if not in understanding – we have divided the Great Commission into two parts. We call one part “evangelism,” and we call the other “discipleship.”¹

That is not how Jesus understood it. A reading of the Gospels discloses that Jesus discipled the Eleven into conversion – they most probably were not converted when he initially called them to “follow me.” This paper deals with the tragic consequences of the difference between Jesus' and our understanding of discipleship and calls for repentance and a change in the way we fulfill his final instructions.

Most of us believe that the Gospel is meant to not only save souls but to change the lives of individuals, families, communities and their societies. Jesus told his disciples “You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world.” So how much salt does it take to change an unsavory culture? How much light do you need to illuminate the darkness?

Consider Kenya. According to Operation World, Kenya is the most reached nation in the world, at 49% evangelical.² Every other citizen is an evangelical. Very salty. Kenya Evangelical Alliance represents 38,000 churches and 10 million Christians.³ Lots of light. Yet the country ranks 147th (out of 182, in other words, at the 20th percentile) on a scale of Human Development Indicators (a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living).⁴ Forty-eight percent of its population lives in multidimensional poverty. The corruption index is 139 of 168.⁵ Some rate Kenya as “the third most corrupt country in the world.”⁶

Or El Salvador, 32% evangelical and a life expectancy of 58.5. As described in Operation World, this nation of six million is still recovering from a 12-year civil war, a recovery complicated by “a blanket amnesty law” still in effect today “that shielded all military and guerilla forces from prosecution for human rights abuses committed during the war.”⁷ On the Corruption index El Salvador comes in at 72, about in the middle.

¹ In this paper I use the terms “evangelism” and “discipleship” because they are terms most evangelicals use in thinking about the Great Commission.

² Defined by adherence to: 1) The Lord Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation through faith in Him, as validated by His crucifixion and resurrection. 2) Personal faith and conversion with regeneration by the Holy Spirit. 3) Recognition of the inspired Word of God as the ultimate basis and authority for faith and Christian living. 4) Commitment to biblical witness, evangelism and mission that brings others to faith in Christ.

³ <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/kenyan.evangelicals.warn.obama.not.to.use.his.visit.to.press.for.gay.rights/59919.htm>

⁴ Operation World

⁵ Corruption Perceptions Index measures the perceived levels of public sector corruption worldwide. <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015>

⁶ [Per a survey on prevalence of economic crimes released in Nairobi \[Feb 2016\] by audit firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers \(PwC\).](#)

⁷ <http://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/>

Operation World indicates that the Philippines is 92% Christian, 12.3% evangelical. Yet the church suffers from “unabating fragmentation ... schisms, broken fellowship or unhealthy and authoritarian leadership patterns.” According to Transparency International, “The country was ranked 105 out of the 176 countries assessed by Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index in 2012. With a score of 37 out of 100, the Philippines was one of the worst performers in the region.”⁸

In the missionary industry we speak of the “reachedness” of a country. The goal of our service is to see a certain percentage of the population identified as evangelical. The Joshua Project considers a nation over 10% evangelical as “reached.” To my knowledge, there is a general consensus for this measure in the evangelical missionary community. While there is some merit in such a measure, it doesn’t capture the whole picture. The nations above serve to illustrate why I say that. All are over 10% evangelical, but can we say that these nations have been discipled (per Matt. 28:19-20)?

Perhaps it’s not about how much salt, but how savory is the salt. Not how much light, but how brightly the light is shining. Is something lacking in our global harvest effort? I want to suggest we have misplaced the priority given us by the Lord of the harvest.

Before I go further, I want to affirm without equivocation the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He himself sent us to preach the gospel. A classic missionary passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans says it like this: “How then will they call on 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 someone preaching?” (Rom 10:13-14 ESV).

Let there be no mistake about my commitment to the necessity of evangelism, i.e. preaching the gospel of the kingdom to the world. Sharing the content of the Good News of salvation includes the proclamation of our sinfulness, our hopeless condition without the redemption paid for by the blood of Jesus sacrificially shed on the cross, our need to confess our sin, to repent and accept the promise and our assurance of the forgiveness of sin, and the glorious hope of eternal life with God. There is no mission without evangelism. And, yet, without discipleship we cannot fulfill the great commission. Being born from above is only one step in the process of discipleship.

Notwithstanding the essential nature of proclamation, the Great Commission’s purpose is clearly stated as discipleship – teaching people to obey, to submit to all that Jesus taught. Therefore, I want to frame this paper around five questions:

1. What did Jesus send us to do?
2. How well do our typical missionary efforts correspond?
3. What do our results look like?
4. What does a discipled nation look like?
5. Do we need to repent and change our thinking and strategies?

⁸ http://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Country_profile_Philippines_2013.pdf

What did Jesus send us to do? Mat 28:19-20: *Disciple the nations.*

The imperative of the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is equipping would-be followers to obey. The three participles of Matthew 28 are *going, baptizing* and *teaching to obey*. The three participles work together to reach the imperative goal of discipleship. The primary goal – not only of the Great Commission but of the entire New Testament – is to equip God’s people to live under and to live out the rule of Christ in all areas/domains of life. Yes, conversion is a prerequisite to full discipleship, but it is not the goal.

The example Jesus demonstrated for fulfilling the Great Commission was not primarily conversion followed by discipleship. Rather, the methodology is discipleship – a process in which conversion may occur, often in the early stages of learning to follow Jesus.

In practice, evangelicals often reverse Jesus’ model. We generally assign the largest part of our attention, time, and resources to conversion. My observation is that this reversal has had significant negative consequences for the task God has given the Church and is used by our Enemy in his war against Christ’s Kingdom. My brothers and sisters within the evangelical tradition are often prisoners of the paradigms of traditional evangelicalism, paradigms that blind us to the effects of this reversal. The consequence is huge: we lose the soul of the cultures. I’ll explain why later.

Jesus preached the gospel of the kingdom. His priority was calling sinners to repentance and providing for their redemption. This is why he came into the world (Luke 19:10; John 12:46-47). Yet, in contradistinction to his own priority, Jesus assigned a different priority to his followers. That priority? “Make disciples of the nations” (Mat. 28:19-20).⁹

Why would Jesus give us a different priority than that of his own ministry? I think it is precisely because Jesus’ priority was salvation. History shows that the most effective form of evangelism is the witness of Christians who first model and then communicate the comprehensive good news of the Kingdom. Again, preaching has its place. Yet the clear evidence suggests that more people come to faith in Christ as a result of seeing Jesus in the life of someone they know than those who come in response to a sermon. Thus the imperative of making disciples. Not everyone is gifted to preach, but every discipled follower of Jesus is equipped to communicate the gospel.

The second Lausanne congress on evangelism (Manila 1989) demonstrated this truth. One speaker was tasked with the subject of effective evangelistic strategy. He asked participants who had come to Christ through crusades to stand (and remain standing). Then, one by one, he listed other key strategies: tracts, films, street preaching, etc. He asked the participants to stand when the method through which they came to Christ was mentioned. When he finished, less than a third of the audience standing. The rest remained seated. Then he asked, “How many of you came to Christ through a relationship?” At that point, virtually everyone still seated—hundreds of evangelical mission leaders—stood to their feet.

⁹ Some argue that other versions of the Great Commission – Mark 16:15, Luke 24:46, Acts 1:8 - don’t mention discipleship. But given that Matthew’s statement is the most comprehensive it seems that sound hermeneutics would consider it the plumb line against which other versions are to be compared.

Discipleship is a highly relational process by which people are taught to live like Jesus: in loving, self-sacrificial service to others. It seems evident that this evangelistic “method” has resulted in more conversions than any other, maybe more than all others combined. This is why the Great Commission is built around the task of making disciples.

How closely do our efforts correspond to this mandate?

An honest evaluation will conclude that our global missionary and church-growth activities have been largely out of synch with Jesus’ command to make disciples. We have preached and sought to get converts much more than we have modelled and sought to make disciples. The reason is understandable. So many are lost and urgently need to hear and respond to the good news of salvation. Their lost condition pulls on our compassion. So, we “preach the Gospel.” Unfortunately we are so compelled by their need to be saved that we are distracted from Jesus’ command to disciple.

Broadly speaking, our evangelical paradigm leads to two errors. The first is a misappropriation of weight given to evangelism resulting in the neglect of making disciples. It is giving practical priority to seeking converts as opposed to forming disciples. The second is the working assumption that if we teach biblical truth, new converts will follow Jesus. I use the words “practical” and “working” to indicate that we probably don’t make these choices from theological convictions. It’s just easier and seems more compassionate to put time and resources into evangelism than the life-long process of equipping for obedience. It is more fun to have babies than to raise them!

Further, we typically measure “discipleship” in mostly cognitive terms. This assumption—that knowing content leads to obedience—is faulty. I don’t mean to discount the importance of learning what the Bible teaches. But little Bible teaching in evangelical churches has any behavioral accountability attached to it. Biblical content is taught as though it leads to obedience. Evangelicals study the Bible in Sunday School, Bible classes, small groups, etc. This is good and necessary. But along with the teaching there is very little in the way of intentional accountability for doing what the Bible teaches.

Our common parlance, “evangelism” and “discipleship,” are both non-biblical words. Western thought tends to divide discipleship into two sequential actions. We think evangelism must come first, leading to conversion. Only then do we begin what we think of as discipling - Bible study, prayer, witnessing, and other spiritual disciplines. These are good and important but the lesser part of genuine discipleship which is equipping converts to obey Jesus. This two-step dichotomy is unbiblical and causes serious problems. But since avoiding these terms would inhibit understanding I use the language employed by most evangelicals.

What do our results look like?

I have visited countries where thousands of churches have been planted in the last five decades. Instead of actively working to bring God’s present intentions of shalom to their communities, many of these churches are seen by their neighbors as isolated and irrelevant. Peter Hammond, of Frontline Fellowship headquartered in South Africa, writes,

If the Christian Church was doing what our Lord has plainly commanded in Scripture, then these false religions and anti-Christ ideologies would be in defeat and retreat. It is the basic

failure of our churches to make disciples, teaching obedience to all things that the Lord has commanded, that lies at the root of this catastrophic situation. The salt has lost its savor. The light is being hid under a bushel. The last Command of Christ is not the first concern of most churches. The Great Commission is not the supreme ambition of most congregations.¹⁰

The Great Commission is not the first time God called His people to serve the world. God's intentions with respect to a community or nation are summarized in one Hebrew word: *shalom*. He calls His people to bring His blessing and love to those around them. It's much easier just to go to church. We would rather get excited about a "worship" event than serve in sacrificial love. This phenomenon is not new.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations-- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. Isaiah 1:11-18 ESV

The church is supposed to be comprised of people who hold themselves to a higher standard of integrity, love, and service, etc., yet studies show that there is little difference between the lives of the people in the church and those in the wider culture. Though I love the Bridegroom and his Church, and though I have passionately given my vocational and avocational life to serve it, my own kids who love the Lord often avoid the institutional church because they are turned off by the discrepancy between what the institutional church proclaims and what they see in her people. Perhaps you identify with this experience in your own children.

Here is a quote from a letter I recently received. It is from my son, an executive with a music company.

You ... [spoke of the churches] inability to distinguish itself or its message from that of its contemporaries' messages and voices... I was in Las Vegas at a corporate convention a few weeks ago and ... during the main presentation in Las Vegas of all places - I felt distinctly like I was in church!!! And I was being sold a product with the best of what contemporary entertainment and crowd psychology had to offer. I don't think the enemy could have thought of a more brilliant distortion if he was seeking to disempower the Church than to teach it to "sell."

Is it possible that the consequences of not making disciples is perhaps the key reason that the Church is losing the battle for the soul of our cultures? In my own American culture, we appear to have lost the battle – at least in this generation. Our younger generation wants

¹⁰ Frontline Fellowship Blog, October 21, 2014

"authenticity" in the acts it participates in and in the relationships they have and build. As they look at the church, they see inauthenticity. So, they vote with their feet. Point: when we focus on evangelism instead of discipleship, we breed inauthentic people. So there is a very practical consequence to our corporate misplaced priorities or misapplication of the Great Commission.

Mike Metzger writes a weekly column, Clapham Commentary. His 9/29/15 posting included the following:

Given current trajectories described in the recent Pew study as well as Barna research, it's likely that religious "nones" will constitute 46 percent of the US population (from 23% today). They're into spirituality but not Christianity. For them, popular renditions of the gospel are been there, done that.

Exiles will represent 22 percent of the country. They're mostly millennials and largely disaffected evangelicals. They believe in Jesus. They're Christians. But for exiles, the prevailing renditions of the gospel and church are been there, done that.

Exiles are exiting a tradition Pew calls Evangelical Protestant, often found in independent churches.... Given its current trajectory, Evangelical Protestantism will drop below 20 percent of the population by 2030 (from 26% today) ... By 2030, it is likely that 80 percent of the US population will view the gospel as been there, done that."

Proclamation is necessary, but proclamation alone does not result in disciples. Over the last 50 years, a well-known evangelist preached to 215 million people in 185 countries. His organization estimated that "only about 25% of those who come forward at one of his events actually became Christians." In recent years, studies have shown that only 6% of people who "come forward" at an evangelistic crusade are any different in their beliefs or behavior one year later."¹¹ One wonders how many of those 6% would be recognizable today as disciples? Am I calling for less evangelism? No. We must communicate in the biblical pattern the lostness of man, the horror of hell and the dying love of Jesus that rescues sinners. I'm not calling for less evangelism. I am calling for more biblical discipleship.

What does a disciplined nation look like?

Can an entire culture really change for the better? For many people, the idea of discipling a nation or community seems absurd or impossible. Most of us have read Matthew 28:19 as, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the individuals in the nations."

Almost 20 years ago I was one of the co-founders of Disciple Nations Alliance, a global partner of the WEA. The DNA exists to help churches rise to their full potential as God's principal agent in restoring, healing, and blessing broken nations. Two of our foundational truths read as follows:

Nations are disciplined as the church makes the Kingdom visible within its culture, by faithfully obeying God's Word in every area of life and every realm of society, including the family,

¹¹ <https://redeeminggod.com/crusade-evangelism-effective/>

community, arts, science, media, law, government, education, and business (Gen. 1:26-28; Col. 1:18b).

Nations are disciplined as local churches send their members into every sphere of society. Acting as agents of transformation, these members use their skills and God-given gifts for ministry and service to others. By lifestyle and intentional action, they promote the reign of Christ in each of their respective spheres (Eph. 4:11-13).

Such aspirations are not merely wishful thinking. History demonstrates that these are achievable goals. If we would turn from our predominant evangelical emphasis on numbers of converts, numbers of churches planted, etc., and return to our own ancient missiology of incarnation, I am convinced that the world would be drawn to Jesus because they would be touched by him through us. Oswald Chambers says, “We look for God to manifest Himself to His children: God only manifests Himself in His children.”¹² Evangelism would be a by-product of the way we live, the way God shows Himself through us, rather than a separate category of Christian activity. And I believe those who come to Jesus would be much more likely to draw to Him by our lives.

Here are five examples of disciplined cultures or nations.

The Early Church

Rodney Stark’s study of the early church convinced him that the primary cause of the growth of Christianity during the early part of the Classical period was the lifestyle of the early Christians. In other words, they incarnated Jesus. It was the beauty of what Stark calls a “new kind of humanity” that drew others to become citizens of the Kingdom of God and of His Christ.¹³ The church grew, and the culture was disciplined (only to degenerate later when the model of self-sacrificial love was distorted into compulsion under Constantine).

The Reformation

Most Christians have heard the name John Calvin, one of the leading Protestant reformers. Not as many know the scope of his influence on the city of Geneva, the nation of Switzerland, and all of Europe and the West. Tom Bloomer, provost of the University of the Nations International, has written a lucid and helpful paper, “Calvin and Geneva: Nation-Building Missions.”¹⁴ Dr. Bloomer elaborates on the three-fold “strategy of the Reformers ...

1. Preaching the gospel to individuals, so that people would be saved and start to be transformed, and the church would be restored to biblical purity;
2. Teaching the city, so that people would know how to live, the authorities would know how to govern, and all would know how to work in their different spheres; and

¹² *My Utmost for His Highest*, April 21

¹³ From *The Rise of Christianity*

¹⁴ http://www.biblicalworldview.com/Calvin_and_Geneva_Bloomer.pdf

3. Accountability for individuals and the leadership in spheres of society, so that the teaching would not just be theoretical but applied in all areas of life.”

The legacy of John Calvin was both deep and broad. He understood the comprehensive nature of Jesus’ claims. The Protestant Reformation movement taught that “the Bible must be the source of authority to shape every aspect of people’s lives, and the foundation of truth for entire communities and nations.”

The Wesleyan Revival

Christian Overman points out that Great Britain in the day of Wilberforce presented social challenges rivalling those of the West today. “Twenty-five percent of the single women in London were prostitutes. Liquor flowed so plentifully that the day became known as the ‘Gin Age.’ Gambling was a national obsession and ruined thousands. Daylight fornication [was practiced] on the village green. Executions, known as Hanging Shows, attracted huge crowds.”

Some Christians were no doubt saying, *These are the end times!* Others withdrew from society into the fortresses of their churches. But God sent the Wesleyan revival. The fruit of that included William Wilberforce (and other British leaders) who “*saw Christianity as something more than a private, personal religion. They saw ‘real Christianity’ having enormous implications for the whole of society.*”¹⁵

The effects of the Wesleyan revival in England were far reaching. Unlikely even. For example, productivity in the mining industry decreased temporarily until the mules in the mines had learned the new, curse-free vocabulary of their recently reborn human drivers!

The Great Awakening

Dr. Ralph Winter writes about a parallel revival in the United States.

In the 1700s a simultaneous awakening occurred called the Great Awakening, which both exploded church membership and led to the Declaration of Independence, and where, later, in the 1800s a Second Great Awakening brought thousands more into the churches, drastically overhauled society and led to the Civil War. These major “awakenings” are far more significant in American history than our secularized school books reveal.

... In contrast to the almost exclusively personal-salvation oriented Evangelicalism of the Second Inheritance, [the “First Inheritance” Awakening] engaged in a mountain of social reforms parallel to Wesley’s profound social impact in England. ... Without this democratically governed inter-colonial model, the birth of the new nation wouldn’t have occurred in the way it did. The crafting of the U. S. Constitution was done one block away from meetings redrafting the Presbyterian Constitution. Many of the same men were involved in both meetings. Many of the same phrases occur in both documents. ... Among America’s leaders the initially Christian vision for wholesale social change became so widespread that it was easy

¹⁵ <http://biblicalworldviewmatters.blogspot.com/2015/09/on-anniversary-of-9-11.html>

for many (whether, as with Tom Paine, spiritually alive or not) to be enthused by a this-world cause. ...

The entire period represented incredible ingenuity, innovation, and—most specifically—attention to what today we would call social transformation. In this mix Evangelicals were the main leaders—not the reluctant followers of secular initiatives. It would be impossible to overstate the significant changes of direction of both the Christian movement and our nation between 1815 and 1850. By 1850, for example, virtually all of the states had banned alcoholic beverages. It was even true that vast numbers would not drink tea or coffee, so extensive was the counter-cultural application of Christian faith to everyday life.¹⁶

SE Asia Today

More recently, a ministry we are connected with that serves in SE Asia has seen similar results.¹⁷ In 2005, Tai Ping village was a typical poor rural community: everyone was hungry most of the time, the houses had dirt floors and mud walls. There were no latrines. People rarely washed. Few children went to school. Church leaders accepted wife beating as the norm. The people were sick, hungry, and illiterate. Most importantly, they suffered from spiritual poverty. They had a saving faith in Christ, but no knowledge of a divine plan for their lives.

Through a simple training event the people learned that Jesus died not only so they could go to heaven, but also to reconcile and restore all things (Colossians 1:19-20; Revelation 21:5). They learned that God's plan is for them to grow mentally, physically, spiritually, and socially (Luke 2:52). They learned that God had given them resources and abilities that He wanted them to use to show His love to others. They began to help those in need with food or simple gifts.

They plowed and harvested fields for the sick. They built houses for widows and orphans. They built roads to their farming areas. Farmers could bring entire crops to market. They grew enough rice to feed their families and to sell. Their income increased 5 to 10 times. Eventually they even built a bridge. The government was so impressed they invited the local TV station to film a news story on the church who kept loving their community. The news item was shown all over the country.

Eventually, the government built a school for the community as a reward for all their hard work. Now, all their children attend through high school, and for the first time ever, a number of children are attending university.

The church learned that God gave them their bodies thus physical health mattered to God. They learned hygiene and the treatment for common illnesses. The community's health began to transform. Neighbors saw the health of the church members improve and began to do imitate their practices. Soon, everyone in the community was using a latrine, washing before eating and cleaning their homes. Every household began gardening and eating vegetables. Today people are rarely sick. Children no longer die from diarrhea.

¹⁶ Ralph D. Winter, "Will We Regain the Vision of Our Forefathers in the Faith? The Future of Evangelicals in Mission" *Mission Frontiers*, September-October 2007

¹⁷ For security reasons I am not identifying either the agency or the country.

They learned what Scripture says about the roles of husbands and wives. They stopped beating their wives and began to show them love. Wives learn to treat their husbands with respect, and parents to show affection to their children.

People in the community became more receptive to the Gospel and the church itself was transformed. Now 90% of the community (about 700 people) profess faith in Christ, attend church, and tithe regularly. About 80% of church members actively participate in acts of service.

Similar stories could be told of many communities in the region. In fact, at least 50 communities have testified, "We no longer have poverty. We want to go to other villages and bring these truths to them."

Do we need to repent and then change our thinking and strategies?

I believe that a major reason – if not the primary reason – for the lack of revival and increasing shalom in the cultures that have been evangelized is that our focus has been on what we call evangelism rather than teaching those who are willing to "follow Jesus" to be like Jesus. That means at least two things: First, it means teaching those who decide to follow Jesus to live in obedience to the order which Scripture subscribes. (Galatians 5:13) Second, it means preparing followers to be servants after Jesus' model – willing, humble, sacrificial and joyful. (Phil 2:5-8; Hebrews 12:2)

Can we repent from our understanding of evangelism and discipleship as two separate events/tasks? Biblical repentance mandates that we first start to see things differently, to change our paradigms before we can realize our error. We need another pair of glasses to see things as they were intended. Apart from seeing the issue of evangelism and discipleship differently, and the subsequent repentance that seeing things differently will require, I doubt there will be change in our behavior or the long term results in our pursuit of Jesus' instructions.

Perhaps such recognition of error, consequent repentance and reordering of priority is too much to expect from our generation. We may be so steeped in our paradigms that change will be too difficult. But, I believe change is coming. Why? I have traveled the Christian world over the last almost 40 years. As I meet with local church leaders they increasingly recognize that the influence of the Gospel proclamation as they have been practicing it is not having the expected results on their people, communities and nations. They are hungry for answers and are finding them as they begin to emphasize obedience to Jesus teachings.

Can we at WEA initiate a humble and prayerful global consideration of this issue?