

The Great Commission

Some time ago two eight-year olds came up to the essayist after the closing devotion of a Vacation Bible School Session. They were happy to tell him - and he was happy to hear - that they were having a little VBS of their own in the afternoon. They were getting the little two- and three-year olds on their street together and telling them about Jesus. One girl was the teacher, the other the helper.

This little incident shows that little children can and do understand the Great Commission. It also shows that they are ready to respond, sometimes in a way that shames their elders. Indeed, the Great Commission is so easy to understand that it takes a theologian to be confused about it. Not only is that so, but the Christian heart is so eager to fulfill the Great Commission that only the most intense and constant efforts of Satan and the Old Adam can keep us from doing so.

Because theologians have been confused about the Great Commission and because of the hindrances Satan and his own Old Adam have placed in his way to keep him from fulfilling it, the essayist committed himself to this study. It will seek to clarify the meaning of the Great Commission, with sidebars on what it means to be a "disciple" and on the "Mission Statement" of his church body. The essayist hopes to help his brothers in understanding the Great Commission; or, to be a little more precise, he hopes to help them keep foreign elements from clouding the understanding they have always had. He also hopes to beat down his Old Adam and to restore his simple zeal to do what his Savior has told him and all his fellow Christians to do.

There are several misunderstandings that have surfaced within our fellowship. One of them has to do with the traditional focus on Matthew 28:18-20 as the one and only Great Commission. The truth is that the Great Commission occurs in each of the gospels and at the beginning of Acts. The Great Commission therefore reads as follows:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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..."

"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well...

This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high...

Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven...

It is not for you to know the times or the dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

The various forms of the Great Commission show us clearly what is meant. We are to get the gospel to one and all. We do so on the basis of the authority of the risen and glorified Savior. We do so by the power of the Holy Spirit, as well as by the Savior's own personal presence and blessing. Some will believe and receive salvation, while others will not believe and they will receive condemnation.

Two things should be noted about the Great Commission. One thing is that it is assumed that some will not believe. The fact that some do not believe is not the fault of the church, as long as the church is using the gospel faithfully. (If the church adulterates the gospel, that is another matter. If it fails to reach out with the gospel, that is also another matter. With this last sentence the essayist does not mean to call anyone into judgment, other than himself. However, he would respectfully suggest that self-examination of our fidelity with respect to our diligence in fulfilling the Great Commission, in the light of our respective gifts and offices, might lead others to join him in contrition and repentance. Indeed, his primary purpose in writing this paper is that it may serve as a fruit of such repentance, as well as an aid in producing similar fruits.) While the church, and all her called servants and members, must certainly strive to grow in fidelity to the gospel, in learning it and confessing it, truthfully and diligently, that growth will never erase the fact that some will not believe. Indeed, the more faithful we are, the more the world can be expected to fight against us. The more beautiful and wonderful and gracious is our expression and communication of the gospel, the more the

unbelievers will hate us, be repulsed by us, will gnaw their tongues and will not repent, will attack us or run from us as if they were running from the devil. Therefore, our fidelity to the Great Commission should never be measured by whether or not people believe, or how many do so.

Another thing of note is that the focus of the Great Commission is the world, and not the church. This does not mean that the church is excluded, because those who are in the church militant are also in the world. But the primary attention is directed toward the unbelieving world, the heathen ("nations") who need repentance and forgiveness, those who do not know the Gospel. The church needs the gospel also, and as we reach out to the world, we teach the church and learn a great deal ourselves.

When we look at the Great Commission, we consider the setting. The Savior had risen from the grave. He had been declared the Son of God with power. He had been raised because of our justification. He was (and is) the first fruits, He was (and is) the living hope. He had proved that He was the Christ, and He had completed the work He came to do. Therefore He was highly exalted, with the name above every name, the name by which we must be saved, the name in which alone prayers are heard, the name at which every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The Great Commission is a part of the glorification of the Savior. We glorify His name whenever we teach, testify, and proclaim the gospel.

The settings differ slightly. Matthew places the Great Commission in Galilee. The other gospels place it earlier, on the first Easter Sunday evening. Acts places it at the Ascension itself. The inference that we may draw is that what we call the "Great Commission" was stated not once, but many times over the forty days, and that we have the most important elements given us in the apostolic word.

The next thing that we notice is the statement of authority. The concept of authority was very important. Jesus gave life to the nerves and muscles of the quadriplegic to show that He had authority on earth to forgive sins. The one sign that He would grant as a *sine qua non* of His authority was the sign of the prophet Jonah. This sign was fulfilled. He had demonstrated that He was the "way, the truth, and the life." His authority was obvious.

Yet He states it, and He states it in this connection. Why? This authority is the basis for the Great Commission. When we think of it, we do an awesome thing. We tell people that they are wrong and lost and condemned. We do not say this alone to those who are so obviously lost, but we say this to all the world's most noble, intelligent, accomplished, and virtuous individuals. We condemn great men such as Winston Churchill and we offer the hope of salvation to the Jeffrey Dahmers of the world.

In Matthew, the statement of authority is specific. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me." The passage is one of those that illustrate the *genus maiestaticum*, the communication of divine attributes to the human nature of our Lord. But the nature of this authority is stated in John 17:2: "You (Father) have given Him (Your Son) authority over all flesh, that He might give eternal life to everyone You have given Him." The authority is the authority to save. (It includes, of course, the authority to judge, and ultimately, to condemn those who do not believe.)

Mark does not have a specific statement of authority.

Our Savior's statement of authority in Luke is that He fulfilled the promises in "MOSES and the PROPHETS and the PSALMS [the three parts of the Old Testament.] Because of this repentance and forgiveness could be and must be proclaimed in His name.

In John Jesus says, "As the Father sent Me..." The fact that the Father sent Him is a sufficient statement of His authority to save.

Acts continues Luke, and the authority of the Savior is implied in the fact that He showed Himself alive after His suffering.

The statement of the Savior's authority is then the basis for the authority of His commission to the church. "Go, therefore..." - Matthew. (Both Matthew and Mark have aorist participles which have the force of an imperative.) In Mark the signs demonstrate that the church shares the Savior's authority. In Luke the authority and necessity of proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins is given the same basis as the Savior's sufferings and death - "It is written." God's promise that this would be done is as sure a statement of divine authorization as there can be. In John Jesus breathes on His disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" and "As the Father sent me, so I am sending you." The Holy Spirit's coming on the disciples is important in Luke/Acts, as well as the statement, "You will be my witnesses." In the mouth of Jesus, this simple declarative statement is even more impressive than any command (other than His own).

Now comes the most important part, the part in which confusion has crept into the church, and into our own fellowship as well. The church is to go and to do, to go and to proclaim the gospel to all the people of the world. This is so simple that it seems impossible for there to be any questions at all. And yet there is confusion. It comes from a misunderstanding of the phrase "make disciples of all nations." This is further complicated by a misplaced emphasis on what it means to be a "disciple" and on "discipleship." (The essayist knows he is getting old, because he did not learn anything about "discipleship" when he was in school; he remembers learning a great deal about "sanctification" and "stewardship" and our continuing obligation to grow in them, but he does not remember being urged to greater and greater degrees of "discipleship.") The matter becomes worse when it is forgotten that the command of the Savior is "make disciples of," and not "make disciples." It is all too easy to look at the English and think that Jesus wants us to "make disciples out of all the nations" rather than "Make all the nations disciples" or "Make a disciple of all the nations." To make matters worse yet, it is assumed that to make disciples means to produce disciples, to turn people into disciples.

Other misunderstandings that have appeared in our circles, and in the essayist as well, are the following:

1) That the word means to make all nations *your* disciples. The idea is not so far off, but the verb itself does not mean to gather disciples, as we shall see.

2) That the word means to call all nations to discipleship. Again, the idea is not so far off, and it fits well with the proclamation of repentance, but it is simply not what the word means. The essayist regrets that he has to rule this interpretation out, since it was his favorite and he had conceived of some of his best lines in presenting it. But if the Lord does not return first, those lines will surface in another connection.

3) That the word means to convert all the nations. This interpretation is better than the concept that we should turn some people from all the nations into disciples in that it takes all the nations as the direct object of the verb, which it is, and not as the object of a preposition. It takes seriously the fact that the verb is "Make disciples of" rather than "make." But it still interprets the word so as to mean "produce" disciples, which it does not mean. It should be noted that the essayist is not saying this because it is impossible for us to convert all the nations. If our Savior commanded us to convert all the nations, that would be our charge, and we would be responsible for it, whether possible or not. But that is not what the word means, and, as we have seen above, the overall statement of the Great Commission presupposes those who will reject, as well as those who will accept.

What does the word MATHEETEUEIN mean? It means to make a disciple of all the nations (the essayist's favorite way of putting it) in the sense of teaching them. (That's right, we're back to Luther and the King James. Those men of Wittenberg and Oxford never saw any of the papyri, and they were not able to hunt through the remains of obscure monasteries. To check anything out of the Vatican Library would have been hazardous to their health, to say the least, and they were not even blessed with a course to teach them the relative dates and weight of manuscripts and uncials. However, between them they still managed to come up with a couple of fairly decent translations. Incidentally, the essayist must freely confess that he was surprised to find himself coming to this conclusion. He did not expect it, but the evidence compels him in this direction.) What is the basis for this? There are three.

The first is the root meaning of the word itself. According to Liddell and Scott (the unabridged, not the version we used for Xenophon et al.) the word means simply to be a pupil or "make a disciple of, instruct." So it considers the two expressions "instruct" and "make a disciple of" - to be equivalent in meaning, differing in color only. The essayist agrees wholeheartedly, and will go into the color of the word shortly.

A second reason to understand the command to mean to "instruct" rather than to "change into disciples" is presented by the parallel forms of the Great Commission. This comparison yields evidence even more forceful than that provided by the other New Testament usages of the verb. What do the words say again?

"Go into all the world and proclaim (herald) the gospel to every creature." - Mark

"It is written...that on the basis of His name repentance and forgiveness of sins be proclaimed to all the nations (Gentiles, heathen) - beginning from Jerusalem; you are witnesses of these things." - Luke

Whosoever sins you forgive, they have been forgiven to them; whosoever sins you retain, they have been retained." - John (How do we forgive sins? Through the proclamation & application of the gospel. How do we retain sins? Through the proclamation & application of the law.) This passage shows that the great commission cannot mean "convert all nations," since it presupposes that the church will retain the sins of some.

"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and even to the ends of the earth." Acts

All of these are forms of communication. Although all of them have as a goal the conversion of the nations, not one of the verb forms has anything to do with converting.

The differences in the verbs are differences in color. Each presents a different picture. Mark proclaims as a herald makes a proclamation, as a reporter gives news, or a messenger delivers his message. You can see parallels not only in the preacher, but in the reporter, news anchor, mail carrier, the old newsboy shouting "Extree, Extree, read all about it," etc. Luke/Acts has both the cry of the prophet and the solemn testimony of the witness. The prophet calls people to a recognition of the reality of their sins, and points them to the Lamb of God who took away all their sins. The witness speaks the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. John has the sacerdotal declaration of the priest, which was very closely related to judgments pronounced by the Sanhedrin or by *Beth Din*, the local Jewish court.

What is the coloration of Matthew? Matthew gives us the picture of the rabbi teaching his students. The emphasis is on the authority of the proclamation. (The completeness of the instruction is also in view.) Jesus taught with authority that amazed those who heard Him at the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere. This is clearly stated in Matthew. During His earthly ministry, Jesus also sent His disciples only to the villages of Israel. To the Canaanite woman He said that He was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. But now He who has all authority in heaven and earth sends his apostles to all the nations (Gentiles, Heathen). As Jesus was in His earthly ministry to Israel, so now the church is to be to the nations until the time of His return.

The question has been asked, "Is the commission of the church to make disciples or to preach the gospel?" It is the contention of this paper that there is no difference between the two, let alone an antithesis requiring a synthesis. Furthermore, it is the contention of this paper that when a person takes "Make Disciples" out of "Make disciples of," a misunderstanding of the term results as a matter of necessity, bringing with it a consequent misinterpretation and misappropriation. The writer is well aware that in saying this he is critiquing the Synod of which he is a member, and he is also expressing disagreement with men who are his superiors in many ways, with men whom he holds high in love and esteem. He is also aware that he is taking a position that seems opposed to the entire

visible church. Again, he has come to that conclusion because he has been forced to it by the evidence.

One more point should exclude the possibility that the word might mean "produce disciples." Among the Jews, the goal of the action expressed by MATHEETEUEIN was not to produce disciples, but to produce rabbis, elders, teachers of the law, and scribes. They would be disciples during the process of their education, and they would always consider themselves disciples of their teachers, but to become a disciple was not the goal.

It has been suggested that this verb was used in Matthew to emphasize the point that the Holy Spirit is making us His partners in bringing people to faith. The writer submits that there is no more, as well as no less, of that emphasis in this term than in any of the others. It is certainly true that the teacher in this case has a passionate desire for his students not only to learn what he knows but also to believe what he believes. But that is just as true of the other figures as well. The herald not only wants to impart the contents of his message and his news, he wants that good news to make everything well for all who hear; he wants people to believe, be baptized, and be saved. The witness not only states the truth, he wants that truth to be heard and accepted by others. The truth has set him free, and he wants his hearers to share that freedom. The prophet calls out urgently, first because he wants to serve and glorify the name of his Savior, but also because he wants the people who hear him to repent and receive forgiveness. The sacerdotal judge pronounces the absolution, not only on the basis of the Office of the Keys or the doctrine of universal justification, but also because he wants poor sinners to know and believe that God has put away their sins, and put them away forever, for Jesus's sake. Even when forced to withhold absolution, he does so in the hope that the impenitent will realize the enormity of their sin and the profundity of their need for the Savior and His forgiveness. In all forms of the Great Commission, we have the high honor and privilege of being partners of the Holy Spirit, and in all forms it is our passionate desire that our hearers be saved. But in all forms of the Great Commission we have the responsibility of communicating, not of converting. It is demanded of us that we be faithful, it is never demanded that we be successful. Our Savior calls us to take action, He does not call on us to produce results. (There will be more on the import of this distinction later.)

"Make a disciple of" is augmented by supplementary or complimentary participles. (These participles themselves have been the subject of controversy. Some maintain that these are participles of attendant circumstances, while others insist they are participles of means. The essayist does not object to these terms, though he does have trouble with the use made of them. "Baptizing" and "teaching" can certainly be the means in which we "make a disciple of all nations." What is wrong is the all too common thought that "by baptizing and teaching" we make disciples; that is, produce disciples; that is, bring people to faith and take them on to maturity. We certainly want this result for every individual, but the verb does not mean "produce disciples." Similarly, "baptizing and teaching" certainly go on while we "Make a disciple of" all nations, but they are not participles of purpose, as has been claimed by some. We do not disciple all nations so that we may baptize and teach them, but baptizing and teaching are components of discipling all nations.) They do not necessarily define the verb - though coming close to doing that in this case - but they do give us added information about the action in the main verb.

The present participles tell us that the action is continuous, but that would be obvious in other ways. BAPTIZOMENOI tells us that part of our communication is through the sacraments. Baptism communicates our adoption into the family of God, among other things. God had put his name on Israel, and through baptism His name comes to all the nations. It has been stated that this participle also tells us that "Disciple all the nations" has to mean make believers out of them, because faith is the Spirit-given result of baptism. This statement falls short for many reasons. Baptism is unique in a number of ways - the use of water, the fact that it is applied only once to the individual, etc. However, baptism is not unique in its power or its blessings. In that respect it is no different than the proclamation of the Gospel, its presentation in any form, absolution, or the Sacrament of the Altar. Baptism does not confer irresistible grace, nor does it function *ex opere operato*. The Spirit-intended, Spirit-given result of the proclamation of the gospel is also faith and salvation. However, when Christ says, "Preach the Gospel to every creature," that does not mean the every creature will be saved. Similarly, when our Savior says "baptizing them - the people of the nations - in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," that does not mean that the people of all the nations will be saved. The masculine plural pronoun does not refer to "disciples," since there is no MATHEETAS in the original to

which it may refer. This is why the essayist prefers "Make a disciple of all the nations" as a translation. AUTOUS is used rather than AUTA because it agrees logically with ETHNEE, rather than reproducing the precisely corresponding grammatical form.

But how can we baptize the people of all the nations? We cannot baptize anyone without consent. Only some individuals can be baptized. How can we fulfil this aspect of the Great Commission? We have been and are fulfilling this task by baptizing as a part of our work. As a supplementary or complimentary participle it tells us that baptizing is a constant part of our work, not that we have to be continually baptizing. We fulfill this by offering baptism to one and all. And when we baptize, we not only proclaim the gospel to the person who is being baptized. Why do we baptize in church? There are a number of reasons, but two of them are to remind the baptized of the blessings of their baptism and to invite the unbaptized to share in those blessings. In other words, Baptism is a proclamation of the gospel to all who witness it, as well as to the person baptized. In the same way, Holy Communion is a proclamation of the gospel to all in attendance, not only to the communicants. Ultimately the sacraments are a proclamation to all the nations, not only to the individuals who receive them. So the church has been and continues to employ baptism as a part of its communication to all the nations.

But what about the "teaching"? How can "teaching" modify "teaching"? It doesn't. The modifier is not the teaching, but the scope of the teaching - "each and every thing I have commanded you." As we teach the nations with the authority of Rabbi Jesus, we are to teach everything that He has commanded us. But surely this means that Jesus is talking about disciples, and not about nations, does it not? No, it does not. We are to regard, treat, and address all the nations as disciples. We are to teach the people of all the nations everything that our Savior has commanded us. This includes believers and unbelievers, one and all.

The essayist has obviously put great stock in the secular, classical meaning of the word. But what of the usage? Is it not usage, and not etymology, that determines meaning? It is indeed. But the word only appears three times in the New Testament other than in Matthew 28:19. The first is easily accepted by all to mean what the NIV says it means: "has been instructed." (Matthew 13:52) The next appears to go the other way. Matthew 27:57 says that

Joseph "had himself become a disciple of Jesus." But the verse does not say that he had been made a disciple or turned into a disciple by Jesus. I would further submit that the context does not allow for the idea that Joseph was converted by Jesus in His earthly ministry. Luke 23:51, which tells us that Joseph "was waiting for the kingdom of God," indicates that Joseph was a believer on the basis of the Old Testament before he became a disciple of Jesus. (With Simeon and Anna different objects are used - the consolation of Israel and the redemption of Jerusalem, respectively - but the verb is the same - APODECHETHAI.)

But what of the final usage, that by Luke in Acts 14:21? The NIV translates this as "they won a large number of disciples." The essayist submits that this is a bold translation. It is not bold in the sense of its novelty, for Beck and others translated it this way before the NIV. But it is bold on the basis of the Greek. If the Holy Spirit really wanted St. Luke to say this, wouldn't some form of KERDAINEIN be expected? We submit that this translation is wrong, no matter how many modern translations reproduce it, and that the "original" traditional translation, "they taught many people," is perfectly good here.

For all of the above reasons, we support and maintain the concept that MATHEETEUEIN means to teach as a Rabbi teaches his disciples - with authority and with completeness. As indicated above, we did not expect this to be our conclusion when we began this project. The essayist has found himself more than once trying to establish one thing and being led to something different, and this is one of those times.

There is a Greek expression used in the New Testament that quite literally means "to make disciples." It is used in John 4:1, where the NIV translates 'was gaining and baptizing more disciples.' "Gather" or simply "make" might have been better than "gain."

There is also a Greek expression that means to make a convert. It also uses POIEIN, as does the above, along with PROSEELUTON. Significantly, the expression is used by Matthew (23:15)

This is not merely an exercise in linguistic analysis. It is true that it would be enough if it were. We certainly want to understand every word of Scripture correctly, and we most definitely want to teach what every word says and do so properly. But there are also effects on the life of the church and on its ministry. For one thing it underscores the traditional Lutheran understanding of the role of the

church. In Lutheranism the marks of the church are the means of grace. Among the Reformed one of the marks of the church is obedience. The concept that we are to produce disciples - make converts and lead them to maturity and obedience - fits in with the Reformed vision. In Confessional Lutheranism the fulfillment of the Great Commission is to proclaim the gospel and administer the Sacraments according to the Word of God. Among the Reformed and among the Pietists the Great Commission is not fulfilled until converts are produced. Confessional Lutherans see all Christians as sanctified, and yet needing to grow in sanctification. They see both conversion and spiritual growth as gifts of the Holy Spirit through the gospel, though we do have a responsibility to work with the Holy Spirit in our growth. Pietists see growth as something that they can accomplish through the law, and frequently distinguish between levels of believers.

The concept of "making disciples," that is, producing disciples, fits in well with the Reformed/Pietistic idea, especially when TEEREIN is translated as *obey* rather than *keep* or *preserve*. The essayist does not want to label this wrong because it concurs with the Reformed/Pietistic model. If that model is correct, we should acknowledge that fact and admit that we as confessional Lutherans have been wrong. However, the essayist is sure the words in the original support the confessional Lutheran position. (Lest there be a misunderstanding at this point, the essayist would like to state the NIV is his favorite English translation, and he uses it in his devotions.) We base our position on the original text, and not on any translation. We need also to be on guard against reading from the translation back into the original, rather than the other way around.

Sidebar I: What is a disciple?

The essayist feels that this term has been turned upside down. The disciple is seen as a mature Christian, capable of serving and nurturing others. Sometimes Christians and disciples are identified, and sometimes they are contrasted, as though a disciple were a superior or advanced grade of believer. But we are convinced that this is missing the point. The disciple is not the person who performs great service, but the one for whom great service is performed. The disciple is not the one who nurtures, but the one who is nurtured. The disciple is not a teacher, but a pupil or a student, as Liddell and Scott define the term. (The apostle and servant and manager and overseer and elder and prophet and other such terms -

including pastors and teachers - identify those who perform services.)

How can you say this, you might ask? Think of the self-sacrifice called for to be a disciple: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26,27) Such self-sacrifice implies great service, does it not? And is not this the essence of discipleship?

The essayist confesses that he answered both of these questions with a resounding yes, and his original intent was to work along these lines. However, the answer to the first may be yes, but the answer to the second is definitely no. Self-sacrifice is a necessary condition for discipleship, but it is not the essence of discipleship. And the great service that is performed by a disciple as a disciple is the service of learning and receiving instruction from the Savior's Word.

Does this require self-sacrifice? It does indeed. The greatest of self-sacrifices is implied in the term "hate...his own life." This does not merely mean to be ready to lay down one's life, or even to surrender it to Jesus, as that term is usually understood. The first and hardest part of it is to hate your life, and hate it with a passion, for the sins you have committed. We may take this for granted, but if we acknowledge our sins as they really are, as we must do if we are to learn from the Savior, then we must hate our own lives. Repentance is the first and hardest part of the cross that we must carry. The same is true of those closest to us. We usually say that "to hate them" means that our love for Jesus must be so much greater than our love for them that the latter seems like hatred, and that we must be willing to give them up for Jesus. The essayist does not quarrel with these appropriations. However, if we learn from Jesus we see that even those closest to us are sinners who deserve to go to hell. We see that some of their kindest acts, in terms of humanity, can be really evil, and serve only to lead them to their destruction and us to ours. If they do not repent, we have to acknowledge them as enemies of the Savior. enemies whom we hate with a perfect hatred. If we learn from Jesus, we have to acknowledge that He is always right and that we, whenever we differ from Him, are wrong. This again is part of the cross, and a

very hard part to bear. If we learn from Jesus, we will follow Him, or we will no longer learn from Him. If we learn from Jesus, the world will hate and scoff at us, because we will repudiate its ideologies and attempts to help us.

But this is not the essence of discipleship. That essence is given us by Jesus Himself: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." It is also a *sine qua non* that to be Jesus's disciples we must hold to his teachings. But the expression "really" - ALEETHWS - indicates that here we are dealing with the heart and center of what it means to be a disciple. This is emphasized by the next line. What is the effect or result of really being a disciple? That you will nurture others? That you will accomplish great things in the kingdom of God? That you will give lots of money to fund drives? That you will be a leader in the church? That you will be a witness? That you will be effective in whatever you do? No. Jesus says, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." It is true that once free we may serve Jesus and His kingdom. But the result of discipleship is knowing the truth and receiving the freedom that comes from the truth. Being a disciple is all about what you receive and the effect that it has on you, and not on what you give and the effect that it has on others.

Why make such a point of this? Because the essayist finds it ironic that a shift in emphasis has taken place. The disciple is the student, the one who learns, the one who receives, the one who is nurtured - and we have tended to make it the other way around. In this we have followed the Reformed in their thinking. Discipleship was part of their active vocabulary long before we started to use it. The essayist does not quarrel with the usage. He likes it. But he wants to see the emphasis in the proper place.

There is also a false distinction between believers and disciples that has been floating around. The essayist did not hear it, but one of the young pastors he knows admitted saying words to the effect that "We don't want to be just believers, but also disciples." If we are believers, we are disciples. We are disciples when we read and study the Word of our Savior, we are disciples when we listen to the instruction of one of our fellow Christians, we are disciples when we listen to a sermon, we are disciples when we go to the new "college of ministry," we are disciples at conferences, and so on.

But that is not all. I was a disciples when I sat on my father's knee and he tried to teach me the Catechism. The children in my wife's pre-school VBS class are disciples. The little children whom I mentioned at the beginning of this paper are disciples. All the children in our Sunday Schools, Lutheran Elementary Schools, and Area Lutheran High Schools are disciples. All Christians everywhere, regardless of the level of their knowledge or the pace of their learning, are disciples. They are disciples because they continue to learn and receive blessings from the Savior's word.

Some disciples were also apostles. (Jesus designated the Twelve as apostles at the time He sent them out on their missionary journey. (Matthew 10:2; Mark 3:14; Luke 6:13)) Disciples may also be teachers, evangelists, pastors, prophets, administrators, helpers, encouragers, and so on. One has to be a disciple first, and then one becomes a servant. But the disciple designates the believer as he is served, not as he serves. That's what the Greek says. That is what the essayist maintains.

There is something else about the term disciple. It is dispensable. How can we be sure of that? Scripture dispenses with it. The term disciple is used many times in Scripture, but only in the Gospels and Acts. Rab' Sha'ul, though he had been a disciple and a Rabbi in the formal sense of the word, did not use it in any of his Epistles. John used it in the Gospel, but in none of his other writings. Nor did Peter. Nor did anyone else. Why? One can only guess. But I would suggest that it was not used because it did not have the same significance outside of the Jewish community. I would further suggest that MATHEETEUEIN may have been used by Matthew because his gospel is the gospel of the Jews.

The WELS Mission Statement

The essayist has gone on record as opposing "mission statements." He considers them one of the symptoms of the attempt to supplant genuine leadership with management. He has even suggested that they are not really good for business, even though every business appears to have one. It is his opinion that anyone who needs a mission statement to operate a business ought to sell out and put his money in T-bills. (Oops, he meant to say "Lending to the Lord," "Building His house," etc.) The essayist has gone so far as to say that mission statements are fit only for bureaucratic entities

that have to justify their existence and provide themselves with a rationale for confiscating our money and infringing on our liberties.

The essayist particularly does not like the idea of a mission statement for a church body. When our Savior has given us a mission mandate, what need have we for a mission statement? Of if we need one, why not simply quote what He has given? If we need one, then we have lost our sense of purpose, and the only thing to do about that is to repent in sackcloth and ashes and immerse ourselves in the study of the Word.

A mission statement entails a self-definition. We do not have to make such a definition, nor do we have the right to do so, because we are already defined by God. In the same way, we do not determine our purpose, another of the reasons for a mission statement, for that has also been determined by God. We have the holy gospel that gives us life and purpose. We do not need management tools to get us to do God's work, and we should not even think that we can or ought to try to augment the gospel's motivating power.

But let us assume that a mission statement is a good and necessary thing. What about our mission statement? "As men, women, and children united in faith and worship by the Word of God, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod exists to make disciples throughout the world for time and eternity, using the gospel to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service, all to the glory of God."

A number of criticisms suggest themselves. For example, the phrase "men, women, and children" might run into difficulty when it comes to the order of creation. "United in faith" is less precise than "confession of faith" would be. We are united in faith with the entire *una sancta*, even though we cannot be in fellowship with most of its members and they are not a part of the WELS. On the other hand, should there be any hypocrites in the WELS, we are not united with them in faith, though we are in the same church body. Considering the importance of the Sacraments in the Great Commission and in the life of the church, and our own history of maintaining all that Scripture says of them, some mention of them in the Mission Statement would seem warranted.

"Make disciples throughout the world" sounds like an adequate paraphrase of "Make disciples of all nations." That is, if you base your paraphrase on the English translation of the Great Commission in Matthew. But if you consider the Greek, it is not an adequate

paraphrase. As we have noted above, whenever you take "Make disciples" out of "Make disciples of," you have an automatic mistranslation, misinterpretation, and misappropriation. The essayist does not think that anyone in favor of the mission statement would contest the point that the mission statement says that we exist to produce disciples - dedicated believers - rather than communicate to all the nations as a rabbi would to his disciples. This ignores the Greek meaning of the verb, what it meant in the context of Hellenistic Judaism, and the fact that "all nations" is the object of the verb translated as "make disciples of." The essayist submits that our mission statement should be repudiated, at least in its present form. It ill befits us, who maintain the confession of the truth of God's Word as a whole and in all its parts, who maintain that the Bible is the written Word of God and is to be believed and obeyed in all that it says, who still maintain that Sacred Scripture is inspired, inerrant, and infallible, who criticize all comers for any and every misuse, misinterpretation, or mishandling of Scripture in any way, shape or form - it ill behooves us to proudly put forth as the basis and guide of all that we do as a church body a statement which is based on what can be termed at best a misunderstanding of one of the passages of Scripture.

The present form of our mission statement does something else. It crosses the line which traditionally marks and distinguishes confessional Lutheranism from the Reformed and Pietistic traditions. It clearly puts us into a result orientation, rather than a fidelity and action orientation. Rather than having our primary purpose to use the means of grace in accordance with God's Word, we "use the gospel" as a means to our primary purpose. When this was presented to the synod, none of the promoters mentioned this change of emphasis. Maybe it was not perceived as such. It should have been. And when the synod adopted it, it should have accompanied it with a resolution apologizing to the Pietists and the Reformed for at least some of the criticism that we had heaped on them over the years. At least in this area we concur with them. At least, the majority of the synod does. A minority of us do not. We hope that the rest of you will come to agreement with us.

A possible further alliance with Pietism may be forged by the words: "make disciples...using the gospel to win the lost for Christ and to nurture believers for lives of Christian service..." The words *possible* and *may* were chosen because, though the words admit of a Pietistic interpretation, they do not demand it. It admits of the

interpretation that a disciple is not only a believer but a believer who has been nurtured for a life of Christian service. It is possible to fit the idea of two separate grades into the words, as the young pastor referred to above unwittingly did. While the essayist certainly has nothing against promoting Christian service among all believers, it should be noted that older Lutherans would have primarily spoken of nurturing believers to strengthen their faith. The phrase definitely suggests a shift from the days of the Wauwatosa Gospel, where the proclamation of justification was emphasized so strongly that sanctification took a decided back seat. The essayist recalls an older pastor saying that with our emphasis on sanctification we could not imagine what it was like in the days of his youth (and that was about fifteen years ago).

The essayist would like to see the synod have no mission statement. However, if it has to have one, he would like to see something like one of the old statements of purpose: *United in the confession of the Savior's name and in the practice of fellowship based on all the truths of His Holy Word, the WELS exists to glorify that name by serving all the people of the world with the gospel in Word and Sacrament, as directed by that Holy Word.*

But the above is not our mission statement. The mission statement that we have and the mindset of the last twenty years or so that made it possible have had profound effects on us. The major result is a drop in morale among our ministerium (which is influenced by other factors and will be addressed at a later period) which may hinder rather than aid our outreach. If a person believes that he is responsible for getting the word out, as written, regardless of the results, trusting that the gospel will work faith when and where it pleases God, he can certainly become downcast if there are no visible results. But he will become much more downcast if he believes that it is his responsibility to produce dedicated believers, and that he is failing in his duty to God if he does not do so.

Secondly, we value people more by their results than by their faithfulness to the Word and to the task. This has made us a look ridiculous when some of those honored and promoted in our midst have ended up leaving or being removed from our fellowship. It has also had the effect of encouraging people to judge their pastors by standards outside of the word of God - where we are forbidden to judge - and this encouragement has apparently extended to some of

our leaders as well. One lay delegate summed up his experience at a synod convention like this: "I learned one thing at the synod convention: when a church doesn't grow, as it should, it's the fault of the pastor." Another lay leader equated a "great spiritual leader" with "a people person." That laymen should have such views is not particularly surprising. However, that the leadership of our fellowship agrees and supports these views is surprising and most disappointing.

It should be noted that the essayist does not take issue with the majority line of thought because it makes things harder for him and for his brothers. If God's word made us responsible for the results, the essayist would willingly if not cheerfully assume that responsibility and urge his brothers to do the same. Moreover, he would denounce all who tried to evade that responsibility, and - as everyone who knows him will attest - he would do so loudly, at great length, and with the bluntest of blunt "Luther"an terminology. However, Scripture does not make us responsible for results. We are responsible for what we do and say, and that is plenty. The essayist has enough to repent of and to amend in those areas, without taking responsibility that God does not assign, and he respectfully suggests that others in the fellowship might be in the same boat.

A danger that is certainly evident at the local level, if not at the synodical, is that maintaining doctrine and practice is viewed as a task secondary to our main work, rather than the essence of it. If our task is to produce disciples, sound doctrine and practice that is seen as keeping people from becoming dedicated believers in our midst may be seen as something that keeps us from fulfilling the Great Commission, a hindrance to doing what our Savior wants us to do. On the other hand, if it is our work to give an authoritative, complete instruction to all the nations, then it is absolutely necessary to maintain Scriptural doctrine and practice to fulfill that Commission. (The essayist recognizes the difficulty of maintaining doctrine and practice regardless of one's interpretation of the Great Commission. However, our minority position puts doctrine and practice at the heart of the Great Commission, whereas that of the majority puts it at the side as a means to an end.)

Another danger is that it will exacerbate the tension between education and missions. We have had for many years a lively discussion and debate about where to place our resources. That discussion would be vigorous and unresolved regardless of one's

interpretation of the Great Commission, but it is made worse by the fact that education is seen by some as a side issue. The essayist maintains that Christian education on any level is a fulfillment of the Great Commission, just as mission outreach is.

The essayist has served for many years as a pastor and a circuit pastor, and he is well acquainted with the challenges of the pastoral ministry and how they are affected by the Mission Statement and the mind-set behind it. However the teaching ministry has been affected as well. The essayist observes that teachers are encouraged to attend seminars to help them nurture the family. It has also come to his ears that a paper written by an authoritative source has told teachers that it was not simply their task to teach children, but to make disciples - and not just of the children, but of their families as well. The essayist went to a Lutheran Elementary School in the days when it was still called a Christian Day School, and he has not worked in one since his vicar year. However, he is married to a teacher in one of our nation's urban school systems. She teaches one grade and has specialists for art, music, and gym. But when school is in session, she works twelve hour days, plus a lot of time on weekends and over the summer. A teacher who is really teaching does not have the time and energy for anything else. ***Moreover, a teacher who is teaching his/her class the truths of Scripture and all other subjects in relation to it is fulfilling the Great Commission.*** The teacher does not have to be involved in evangelism, "discipleship" programs, stewardship programs, family enrichment programs, youth programs and the like in order to "Make disciples." (If a teacher has the ability, energy, and gifts to be doing these things, well and good. But teaching itself is a full-time job.) The children in his/her class are disciples.

Back to the Great Commission

Up to this point we have seen that the Great Commission is to go and communicate. Communicate what? The Gospel. Communicate to whom? All the nations. Every creature in the world. Anyone and everyone. The ends of the earth. Up to this time, the Word had come primarily to the people of Israel, and only through them to the world. Now the new Israel, the Church, has the world as its field, and we have an obligation to bring the gospel to all the people in it. As long as this world lasts, and as long as we are in it, our work and our primary reason for being is to bring the gospel to one and all.

This does not mean that we all have the same gifts, function, and roll in this process. Many have the gifts to be evangelists, and many do not. Many have the gifts to be teachers, and many do not. And you could continue to go up and down the list. We all have an obligation to make the most of the gifts we have received, and we all have an obligation to use our gifts in fulfillment of the Great

Commission. All of us can pray for the work, the workers, and the hearers, and we all have a responsibility to do so. We also all have a responsibility to support the work financially at a level corresponding to our material blessings. But we cannot all be forced into the same type of work or style of ministry, and while we want to constantly encourage each other to grow in fulfilling the Great Commission, we need to be very careful about passing judgment on each other. At the same time, each one of us needs to be very sharply critical of himself and his own efforts, seeking power from the word to grow in going and communicating to one and all.

We have already stated that the focus is the world and not the church. As a practical matter, we will be doing a lot of our communicating to the church. "Preaching to the choir" is not to be despised. The choir needs to hear the gospel too. As we have also stated, all of the teaching within the church is a fulfillment of the Great Commission. But we must never lose sight of the fact that we also have a responsibility to see that everyone gets to hear the gospel. The fact that we are not responsible for conversion does not lessen our mission zeal, but rather enhances it. As long as there is one soul who has not heard we owe them the gospel, as St. Paul said. In view of the Savior's sacrifice for us, and all the good and gracious promises of our God that center in Him, we have every reason and every motive and everything we need to keep our spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.

We go and communicate to all the world. We have already looked at the "how" implied by the color of the various terms that describe the communication. What we are to communicate is all the Savior's truth. In Matthew's Gospel that is quite explicit. We are to teach them "to keep each and every thing" that the Lord has charged us to teach. In other words, the whole counsel of God. Not all at one time, perhaps, or even all in one life-time. But the church is to continually teach all the nations each and every part of the Savior's truth. And the church has been doing this, and will continue to do this.

Mark simply says preach the gospel. Now that begins simply enough, but it also includes all of God's promises, and it presupposes the law.

Luke is a little more specific. He speaks of "repentance and forgiveness of sins" as preached in His name. This lends itself most readily to the law/gospel presentations of an evangelism call. But Jesus also said "you are witness of these things." "These things" included how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament which He had just given them the ability to understand.

So the testimony includes all the Savior's work and will as revealed in the Word.

What is the result of the work? Matthew and Luke do not say. John and Mark both let us know that there will be believers and unbelievers, saved and lost, justified and condemned. Success is not promised, nor is it commanded.

What does our Savior promise? He promises that He will be with us until the end of the world. We are not doing the work alone. He is with us, helping us. We do not have to work real hard as if it all depended on us. We work real hard because we can depend on Him to be there for us every step of the way.

In Mark we read of the signs of the Spirit by which the Lord confirmed the Word. In Luke and John the emphasis is on the Spirit who teaches, equips, and empowers the church to do its work. The same Spirit is still with us. The Spirit who gave us a new birth in the kingdom of God also gives us the gifts we need to fulfill our Savior's Commission. He still teaches us whenever we read and study His Word, and He still helps us teach and witness and proclaim and prophesy and pronounce the absolution. He has given us the gospel, and that gospel still works.

The essayist hopes and prays for a clear understanding our Savior's Great Commission, clear to himself, to his fellowship, and to all the church on earth. And he also hopes and prays that all the church, and especially his fellowship, and most especially himself, will continue to grow in fulfilling that Commission. In the words that never seem to grow old, "May God grant it, for Jesus's sake. Amen."