

## **Matthew 28:16-20**

You will remember that last week, on Easter Sunday, the angel at the empty tomb told the women to go tell the other disciples to hustle back to Galilee, and Jesus would meet them there. Then Jesus couldn't wait, and met the women on the road before they could even get back to the other disciples, and told them again to meet him in Galilee. So now they're all back in Galilee, where it all began, and Jesus meets them on a mountain to direct them into the next phase of what God is doing. It's just like when Moses delivered his parting words to the Hebrew people, after 40 years together, before they were to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land without him. The mission continues, but leadership is changing.

We might note that while some of them fell down and worshiped, some doubted--and that seems to be okay with Jesus, because he gives them all the Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." That's the next step. Just as he had sent them out in pairs earlier to heal and to teach, so now he's sending them out for good to "make disciples of all nations", baptizing them and teaching them to obey what Jesus had commanded the first disciples. We have heard this so many times, and given our culture, what this sounds like to us (I'm assuming you react as I do) is "Go out and convert the heathen and teach them to be like us." Between the legacy of colonialism and the well-established nuisance factor of door-to-door evangelists, we have a hard time hearing the Great Commission as a very good idea.

Part of the beauty of having to write a sermon every week is that you chase down fragments of ideas and discover whole bodies of literature that you hadn't known about. This is

also part of the burden of having to write a sermon every week, because the sermon cannot wait until you have fully investigated these bodies of literature and climbed, hungry and dirty but happy, out of the rabbit warren. It has to be written on time. So let me acknowledge some extremely superficial research at this point, research which, rest assured, will occupy many happy hours when I have them to spare. I was reading these familiar words about going out and making disciples, and Jemar Tisby's podcast "Footnotes" came through my feed, and the topic was "Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation" with Jon Ward, a journalist with Yahoo News who grew up evangelical. So I had to check it out, and now I've subscribed to two more podcasts and ordered another book, making this an extremely expensive sermon. But all whining aside, I desperately wanted to know how an evangelical, whose name tells you that he's all about making disciples, thought the movement had failed a generation.

Jon Ward's parents were part of the Jesus movement of the 1970s, when young people re-appropriated the Jesus who'd been held by the respectable tall steeple churches and heard his call for radical transformation:

*The Jesus Movement planted seeds of a radical Christian community. It promised to produce a Christian presence that had a prophetic edge in American life: captive to neither political party, speaking and acting boldly for the poor, the weak, the unborn, the neglected, and the downtrodden. This Christian presence would not be swayed by the appeals to fear used by demagogues over the ages. <sup>i</sup>*

They did what we would've done: they formed a community with like-minded friends--first a bible study, then a church, then several churches and a religious community that encompassed K-12 education and a council of elders who advised families on big decisions, and even an ad hoc committee that lassoed Jon back in when he was in college and started sowing wild oats. (Okay, maybe we wouldn't have done all that.) Ultimately, he found it stifling because of all the

like-mindedness and Calvinist thoroughness.

*The more insular we became, the more incapable we were of discerning the complexities of the world outside our church bubble. We were ever more vulnerable to manipulation by those who told us that existential threats lurked around every corner. We were fearful, combative, and antagonistic members of the body politic, rather than stakeholders interested in and able to contribute to the greater good.*

In the '80s his father became active in protesting against abortion, an issue which the Republican Party picked up and used to co-opt evangelicals into their coalition.

Jon was dismayed to see evangelical Christians support Trumpism. He writes, *The deep fear that drove so many evangelicals to Trump was, to me, the opposite of how a confident faith could help Christians to stand for what was right. If so much of American Christianity had shown itself a fraud, how deep did the rot go?* Hence his book, *Testimony*.<sup>ii</sup> Jon Ward grieves that the faith of his youth has become bad news.

When Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he offered Jesus authority over all the nations. Jesus turned him down. But in today's reading Jesus says that all authority has been given him, on heaven and on earth. Jon Ward's story of the failure of evangelicalism in the last generation helps us understand the difference.

The devil thought that authority came through triumph over and using the ends to justify the means (worshiping the devil in order to gain authority). He offered Empire, which is the power to wield death. The religious right, many probably feeling certain of their rightness, made a deeply cynical deal with those who wield power, thinking that once *they* were in power, they could re-make society in a more godly way--no more abortions, no more gender ambiguity, no divergent views offered in school. But as we're seeing now, coercion doesn't convert. It causes misery and creates resistance. Jesus turned that down.

Jesus gained authority on heaven and on earth through love, vulnerability, and the willingness to lose. And his power is power not to wield death as a weapon, but to neutralize death. When Jesus says to go to "the nations" and make disciples, he's saying, Go out even beyond our own community and serve. We have the Torah, but those poor benighted Romans do not, and they need liberation from Empire too. This is not a call to convert the heathen; it's a call to serve. You make disciples by living the Way: feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner, healing the wounded. You make disciples by love and vulnerability, not by force. And you baptize these disciples because baptism is an initiation into the new way of life of compassion. It's not about faith statements or correct doctrine; it's about reorientation.

Jon Ward has a timely and insightful critique of the corruption of the evangelical movement in the US. But I suspected that even conservative Christians who have experienced other cultures might have a different take on the Great Commission, and I was confirmed in that belief when I found [Alifeoverseas.com](http://Alifeoverseas.com), a website by and about American missionaries. In one entry, the writer acknowledges the manifold abuses and dysfunctions of missionary work. AND she points out what mission work has, that would correct a lot of abuses at home if taken seriously:

“[Woodberry’s] research finds that where Protestant missionaries had a significant historical presence, those countries on average are now more economically developed. These countries have comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in non-governmental associations.”

In fact, Woodberry’s research shows that contrary to popular belief, protestant missionaries often stood in direct opposition to white colonialism. He writes, “[M]issionaries punished abusive colonial officials and counterbalanced white settlers, which fostered the rule of law, encouraged less violent repression of anti-colonial political organization, and facilitated peaceful

decolonization.” . . . **“In short: Want a blossoming democracy today? The solution is simple – if you have a time machine: Send a 19th-century missionary.”**<sup>iii</sup>

“. . . as God’s Church becomes more global, I think that all of us, from all nations, can take a posture of humility in learning from each other—including and perhaps especially the people who we may be evangelizing.”

Jesus sends us out to live with kindness and courage, not to coerce or be afraid of coercion. Jesus played the long game--he rejected a quick victory and suffered for it, but in rejecting coercion, won that long game. Our road is long, too, and it can feel very grim as we fail to rescue every sufferer. But the journey becomes the end, as we stick to the way that outlasted the power of death.

God, may we follow the Great Commission in such a way that. . .

*When people look at our eyes, they see your compassion.*

*When they see us create, they marvel at your genius.*

*When we sacrifice, they know our Savior’s kindness. Amen.*<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.jonwardwrites.org/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/Testimony-Inside-Evangelical-Movement-Generation/dp/1587435772>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.alifeoverseas.com/is-missions-a-joke-answering-the-critics/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.alifeoverseas.com/the-idolatry-of-missions/>