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Matthew 28:18-20  
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"The Great Commission - Ministry by the Ordinary Means of Grace"

As we start out a New Year together, and as I start out my first year with this church as your pastor, it is fitting that we remember today what the church is called to do. And of course, this passage, the Great Commission which we just read in Matthew 28:18-20, obviously addresses this. This is a classic passage used especially when talking about evangelism. And though this passage does talk about evangelism, it speaks of many other important aspects of church ministry as well. This short passage is rich, full of many things which we could speak about in great length. And so I'd like to look at this passage with regards to church ministry. I'd like to ask the question: What does this passage tell us about the vision of the church? What does this passage tell us about what the church should be doing, and how it should be doing it? What does this passage tell us about the church's source of its strength and success? And so I'd like to look at this passage from that perspective: from the perspective of setting forth a vision for church ministry.

Pastor Ligon Duncan wrote an article where he asked the question: "what does a healthy church look like?" In his answer he provided 10 marks of a healthy church, but he summed them all up by saying that a healthy church is focused on growing in the ways that God says his church should be growing. And so that is what I want to look at today. I want us to have a biblical picture of what our church's ministry should look like. Now of course, we won't answer that question exhaustively here today. There are a number of passages in the Bible that together give us a full and complete picture of the church's ministry. But the Great Commission in Matthew 28 is a good place to start.

Looking at this passage then - notice first that this Great Commission involves a call. In verse 19 Jesus calls the eleven to go and make disciples. These two verbs are Jesus' commands to the eleven disciples, and by extension, to all the church that would come from their ministry. Jesus tells them, and he tells us, that we must go, and that we must make disciples; that we must go and we must make disciples.

Let's think about these two commands. Of these two commands, grammatically the emphasis is on making disciples. If anyone is interested in a short Greek grammar lesson, I'd be happy to explain the details of the grammar to them after the service. But for now, understand that the text appears to emphasize especially the command to make disciples. And don't miss the nuance of this command to make disciples. It is not saying just to disciple, as in the act of discipling, but to make disciples. You could translate it as "enlist disciples": "go, therefore and enlist disciples of all the nations". So this command is telling us to enlist; to enroll; to make new disciples. We need to be bringing people into the church.

And yet, clearly, this does not mean that we just bring people into the church. Our work is not just a recruitment effort. For to make a disciple involves much more than just making a new member of the church. Becoming a disciple involves making a commitment; a disciple is a student; he is someone who submits to a teacher, to learn from him, to follow him. A disciple seeks to understand the teacher's teachings and to embody them. Becoming a disciple is much more than just signing up; it's a lifelong choice to follow Jesus. And the church has the privilege and responsibility to disciple others on behalf of Jesus.

But of course this verse doesn't tell us to just make disciples, but it also calls us to "go". We are to be going to the nations in order to enlist men and women of all sorts as disciples of Christ. This means we cannot be content to make disciples of only those around us already. It also means that we must not try to make disciples of only those who are like us already. We are being called to "go", to all nations, and to all sorts of people. This means that we will engage people that are different from us, who have different cultures, different values, different worldviews, and different ideas. This will involve getting outside of our comfort zone. It will mean that we will have to be proactive in reaching out to all. It means that we cannot wait for people to come to us. We must find *them*, not the other way around. Remember, it was our Lord Jesus who came to us in order to save us. We didn't at first come to Jesus, he first came to us! That's what we just celebrated during Christmas. Now, we as his disciples are called to go, on behalf of Christ, to others. And so Christ, through his church, and by his Spirit, continues to come first to sinners, calling them to faith and repentance.

Do you see that this call to go and make disciples of all the nations includes both evangelism and discipleship? This is a two-fold task that Jesus is calling his church to be doing. In terms of evangelism, Jesus is asking his disciples to go to all the nations and enlist new disciples. This is a redemptive-historical milestone. The Old Testament had several prophecies which promised that God would bring salvation not only to the nation of Israel, but to all the nations. Here in the Great Commission, we see those prophecies fulfilled. Jesus calls the church to the task of evangelism, to go and bring the gospel to the whole world, making disciples of all sorts of people.

But as we mentioned, this task of disciple making, involves discipleship. Jesus not only calls the church to evangelism but also to edification. The word "edification" is similar to the idea of discipleship. Originally the word edification came from Latin and described building and construction. When we talk about edification, we are talking about building up believers in their spiritual maturity. The church is called to nurture and grow it's members, training them in godliness, bringing them to a greater knowledge of God and helping them to live in obedience to God's Word.

So do you see the two-fold task which Jesus here entrusts to the church? We have been called to both evangelism and edification. We must seek new converts by proclaiming the gospel, but we must also be ministering to those new converts, discipling them unto spiritual maturity. In turn, these disciples, as they come into the church and grow as Christians, become the future leaders of the church, who also take up this great call and commission to go and make disciples of all the nations.

And so my first point today is that the church is called to both evangelism and edification. A biblical vision of church ministry must see this two-fold task to which Jesus calls the church. This is important, because so many churches today fall to one extreme or the other. Seeker-sensitive churches focus so much on evangelism, that the church can end up giving only "milk" to their members, giving them just baby-food, so to speak, instead of moving on to more "meat". Seeker-sensitive churches often end up with a large group of new converts mixed with more mature Christians who are spiritually starving, stagnating in their growth, from lack of more in-depth teaching from the whole counsel of God. The other extreme is when you have churches that do no proactive evangelism and merely train the existing members. They focus their ministry on the spiritual growth of their members. They may have many members who are very wise spiritually. They may know the Bible backwards and forwards, and may even live godly lives. And, yet, often their growth of membership is not from their going out to evangelize the world, but

only from the bravest of seekers coming to them. Clearly, neither extreme is fulfilling Christ's call to his church. In fact, I think the problem is that we try to separate these things too much into two different categories. Though they are in one sense two different things, the Great Commission doesn't seem to make much distinction between the two. By saying, "go and make disciples", it calls us to both at the same time. The Great Commission demands that the church do both, both outreach and nurture, both enlisting and discipling, both evangelism and edification. This is the call of the church. This must inform our vision of biblical church ministry. A healthy church, is one that is responding to this biblical call to do both evangelism and discipleship.

The next thing I would like you to notice in this text is how Jesus wants us to go about fulfilling this call to go and make disciples. Look again at verse 19. After Jesus calls us to go and make disciples, he tells us a little bit about what that is to look like. In other words, Jesus doesn't just tell us to go and make disciples, and then leave it up to us to figure out how we are to go about doing that. Instead, verse 19 says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you."

Jesus here ordains specifically two ways in which we are to fulfill this call to go and make disciples. Jesus says that we are to be baptizing, and he says that we are to be teaching people to keep all of Jesus' commandments. So to fulfill the Great Commission, we are to be baptizing and teaching. As we go and make disciples, we do this by baptizing and teaching.

Baptism is that sacrament which we do to bring new disciples into the church. And as we baptize new converts, we don't just pour water on them; we baptize them in the name of our Triune God. They are sacramentally declared as disciples by being baptized into the name of their new master - the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

With regards to teaching, that is what we do with disciples in every stage of their maturity as Christians. We teach them initially as we explain the gospel and call them to faith and repentance, and we continue to teach them once they become Christians, giving them greater and greater spiritual food as we teach them the whole Word of God. And our teaching is not to just remain on the intellectual level. We are not just to communicate new information to them about God. Jesus says that we must teach them to observe all the things which he has commanded us. And so this teaching that Jesus is describing is basically describing discipleship. The church makes disciples by training them to know and live out Christ's commandments. And Jesus is very clear about the scope of this training. Jesus says that we must teach them to observe all the things he has commanded; everything! This means that we must not disregard any of Jesus' teachings, or add to them. It also means that the church's teaching is only authoritative when it is calling its members to follow Jesus' commandments. If the church ever tries to enforce something other than what Jesus commands in his word, then at that point it has lost its authority.

And so Jesus tells us in the Great Commission that as we go and make disciples, our ministry must be one where we baptize and teach. So stop for a moment and think about the significance of Jesus telling us to baptize and teach. Surely, these tasks of baptizing and teaching do not exhaustively spell out every detail of how the church is to be fulfilling the Great Commission. And yet these tasks of baptizing and teaching are representative of the means of grace which Christ has given his church. The Westminster Standards identifies three primary means of grace: the Word, the sacraments, and prayer. The means of grace are those things

which Christ has given us to grow spiritually as Christians. And so by Jesus telling us to go and make disciples by baptizing and teaching, he is pointing us to a ministry that makes use of the means of grace which he has given us.

God's means of grace must be the fundamental tools of church ministry. This is what Jesus tells us in the Great Commission. In the Great Commission he points us to these means of grace, either explicitly, or implicitly. He points us to the Word, by calling us to be teaching. He points us to the sacraments by calling us to be baptizing; and even the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is implied by Jesus telling us to observe all that he commanded, which of course includes his institution of the Supper. Prayer as a means of grace is not explicitly mentioned here, but of course would also be implied by Jesus' demand that we observe all his commandments, which would include his teaching on prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer.

Let me stop and summarize what I am saying and make sure it is clear. Scripture in various places tells us of how God gives us grace. We call these "means of grace," and we generally identify three of them: The Word of God, the sacraments, and prayer. These three things are used by God to grow us as Christians. And here, in the Great Commission, when Jesus explains how we are to be doing ministry, he essentially tells us that we need to make use of the means of grace. Jesus is saying that when you are going out and making disciples of all the nations, you must be doing this by using these means of grace.

Many pastors and elders today refer to this sort of focus on ministry as an "ordinary means of grace ministry". Ligon Duncan in that same article I mentioned earlier on healthy churches, describes this. He says, "When we say ordinary means of grace-based ministry, we mean a ministry that focuses on doing the things God says are central to the spiritual health and growth of his people."

And so that is my second point. Our church ministry must be an ordinary means of grace ministry. We must evangelize and disciple, not according to merely our own wisdom, but according to God's wisdom. A biblical vision of church ministry must see that Christ has given us specific instructions for how we are to accomplish the goals he has set before us. Christ has not just told us that we are to make disciples of all the nations, but he has also told us how we are to go about doing that: through the use of the means of grace which he has ordained for us: the Word, sacraments, and prayer. A healthy church does its ministry in the ways that Christ has instructed us.

The last thing I would like you to notice in this text for today is the divine authority that Jesus is giving the church in this Great Commission. The Great Commission begins in verse 18 with Jesus saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth." He then says "therefore"; "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations". Jesus declares his authority and then says that his authority is the reason why we are to go and make disciples. Jesus is fully authorized to issue this Great Commission to us because he holds all authority in heaven and earth.

But is Jesus telling us about his authority here merely to force us into his service? Is Jesus' Great Commission like getting a jury summons in the mail? When you get a jury summons, you are being called to your civic duty, and the reason you show up to perform your jury duty is that the government is fully authorized to demand this service of you. Your jury summons is not a request, it's a demand from the government who has the authority to make this demand of you. Is this why Jesus is telling us about his authority, in order to demand our service?

Well, the Great Commission is in some sense a demand. And surely this task which Jesus calls us to is not an optional one. Jesus is indeed fully authorized to make this request of us. And yet, I do not believe that Jesus is emphasizing his authority here merely to force us into service. I believe instead his mention of his authority is to encourage us that as we go forth, we go forth with his authority. As we go forth to the nations in his name, and on his behalf, we go forth with his authority. Our mission has been divinely authorized and so we go to the world as people with authority.

This is why Jesus finishes the Great Commission with the promise that he will be with us. He says, "and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." By Jesus encouraging us that he is with us, he is telling us that spiritually he is right there along side of us wherever we go. That means that as we go to the world, we go with him and with his authority.

You might remember that a few weeks back here I preached from Acts 18 and I focused on Christ's statement to Paul where he encouraged Paul by telling him that he is with him. I pointed out that throughout Scripture we see a similar promise of God's presence given to his people, especially to God's leaders as he commissioned them to serve him. God repeatedly has told his chosen servants, "I am with you," when he commissions them for service. And that is exactly what he is doing here in the Great Commission. As Christ sends out his church to the world, he commissions us and assures us that he will be us.

And so Christ's authority is the reason why we have been authorized to go and make disciples. We do this in his name and on his behalf. He is our source of strength and success. And so this is my third point. Our church's ministry is not just being *called* to go and make disciples; we are being *commissioned* to do this -- not just called, but commissioned! A commissioner is someone who is authorized to perform certain duties. They are endowed with certain power and authority to act. The church has been given this authority in the Great Commission. We have been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel, proclaiming the sacred truth of salvation in Christ, and in enrolling disciples into the church. As a church, we have been entrusted with the very keys of the kingdom of God! We have been empowered to administer the very means of God's grace to the people.

And because we have been commissioned, we realize that the success of our ministry lies not in ourselves but in Christ who is with us. And so the reality that we are commissioned by Christ should drive us to pray. We must pray for success in ministry. A healthy church is one that prays because it recognizes that its success is reliant upon Christ.

I hope you have begun to see today by this passage a vision for the church and its ministry. As I conclude this sermon today, I'd like to summarize a few of these aspects of the church's ministry, and begin to apply them to us here in Novato.

First, we saw that the church is called to both evangelism and discipleship. Second, we saw that the church must be engaged in ministry using the ordinary means of grace. Third, we saw that the church's success in ministry is reliant on Christ who has commissioned us, and so this should drive us to prayer.

These are all important aspects of church ministry. As we start out in ministry together, I want to make sure we are all on the same page with regards to the vision of the church. I want to make sure we all have a biblical vision of the church and its ministry. And so over the next few weeks, I hope to further elaborate some of these things, and begin to put some of these things into practice.

And so here are a couple things you can look to happen over the next several weeks: During January, I plan to teach in more detail on various aspects of church ministry. For example, in the next three sermons, I plan to preach on each of the means of grace: The Word, sacraments, and prayer. If ministry by the ordinary means of grace is so fundamental as we discussed today, then I think it's important for us to understand more about them. And so for the next month or so, our sermons and Sunday Schools will be focused on aspects of the church and its ministry. After that, I plan to begin a sermon series through the Gospel of Mark, and a Sunday School series through the Westminster Shorter Catechism, both which I hope will continue to give us a great foundation for ministry together, and give us unity on the basics of the gospel and sound doctrine.

A second thing I hope to start up shortly is a monthly prayer and vision casting meeting. You have all expressed to me your interest to see this church grow, and to participate in reaching out to this community. And as we have seen today, this is not an option for the church, but it is Christ's mandate for us. And yet because our success in this ministry is reliant on Christ who is with us, I think it is proper and fitting to begin in prayer. And so at this monthly meeting, I'd like to use that time to go to the Lord in prayer, committing our plans for outreach to him. I'd also like to use that time to talk specifically about our efforts as a church to reach out to this community, and provide opportunities for members to get involved. And so please stay tuned for more information on this monthly meeting, and I'll be working with the session to figure out when the best time for this meeting will be. But in the mean time, I encourage you to be faithfully praying for our church and its ministry.

And so I hope that you all see the importance of what will be going on in the next few weeks and months. Because of this, I especially urge you to be faithful, as much as is possible, in your attendance to our church services. And I hope that you will make every effort to attend, not just the weekly sermon, but also the Sunday Schools, and this monthly prayer and vision casting meeting. We have a solid core group of members in this church, and it's my desire to see each of us getting involved in the ministry of this church. There is much work to be done, and yet a large part of the work is making sure we are all united in a single vision of the church and its ministry. So may we continue to look to God's Word for that vision, even as we saw some of that vision today in the Great Commission. May we invest ourselves in God's word, learning about the work of the church, and then investing ourselves in that work.

And as we labor for Christ, remember how the Great Commission ends. It ends with Christ telling us that he will be with us until "the end of the age". This sets the timeframe of the church's ministry: from commission to consummation. We are in the last chapter of human history. Today we are in that final timeframe, busy in this ministry of the church. But as we minister here and now, may we constantly look forward to the consummation. That is our eternal hope, and may it give you joy and peace, even as we engage in ministry in a world that is hostile to the gospel, even in a county that is hostile to the gospel. Amen.

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