

Final Instructions

Matthew 28: 16-20

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Greensboro, North Carolina
August 26, 2018

What drew you here to First Prez? Over the years, we have done several member surveys asking members what they liked about First Prez and what they, you, would like to see us work on.

Generally, the surveys reveal that folks are drawn to First Prez by worship, music, preaching, children's ministry, and our outreach into the community.

But when we ask members what they'd like to see us work on, there is one area that never, or almost never, comes up: growth or evangelism. Yes, we sometimes clamor for more focus on young adults, or outreach, but spreading the Good News or evangelism doesn't even get an honorable mention.

And I am not surprised that evangelism is not a clamor. I have spent my lifetime with Presbyterians, and truth is that evangelism, or anything associated with it, has not been a part of our recent DNA. Rather, the hallmarks have been worship or education. In recent years, outreach and compassion ministries have emerged and surged.

Today is a church day. We ordain and install new leadership. It's an important day to think about what it means to be the church...our present and our future. So where does evangelism fit into big picture?

I

At the end of Mathew's gospel, we hear what is called The Great Commission. It is the final scene between Jesus and his then eleven disciples. And it is just before The Ascension and Jesus' departure from the physical world. So these are Jesus' final instructions.

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

Go and make disciples. Now I can see you squirming in your seats. I'd bet this is what you are thinking:

Sid, we are Presbyterians! Evangelists? We just don't do that sort of thing! My personal spiritual journey is just that... personal. I'm not comfortable in witnessing or arguing doctrine. And I don't want to be so arrogant as to ask someone the state of their soul or their spiritual life. No, I just want to quietly go about my business, show my faith by what I do and how I love. Quiet faith. That's what I have and want to keep."

Is that how you feel? Well, that's my experience with most Presbyterians.

Believe me, I understand.

And yet, what about these final instructions from Jesus, the Lord of our life? "Go and make disciples." How do we deal with what has been our culture of quiet faith while at the same time taking seriously Jesus' final instructions?

Have you ever been face to face with a street preacher who spouts doom and gloom and wants to save your soul? Most of the time, we cross over to the other side of the street.

While in high school, one of our daughters encountered a street preaching evangelist when she was downtown. The street preacher asked her if she was saved. Flustered she replied, "My father is a Presbyterian minister!" Probably not the right answer for this firebrand. He handed her a booklet, a tract, it's called. So in order to make her escape, she took it and brought it home for me to see. It was titled, "This was your life." It was in comic book form depicting a teenager who dies and finds himself at the pearly gates. It showed all the times he had not taken the gospel seriously and the times he had demonstrated sinful behavior. Then, in the booklet, the teenage boy is shown "The Book of Life." Of course, his name is not in the book. The final page shows God on the throne telling the teenager he is cursed and is to "depart to the everlasting fire."

Have a nice day. I call that Christian terrorism.

The Greek word for *evangelism* means *telling good news*, and most of us find these apocalyptic approaches anything but good news. No, such methods are at least in bad taste, which we Presbyterians sometimes view as worse than sin! And we find such methods an affront to what is the spirit of our Christian faith.

II

However, one of the problems in churches like ours is that we so concentrate on other areas of ministry that we leave the work of telling Good News to the “professionals,” that is, pastors and missionaries. But if we will read or reread the *New Testament*, it will not take us long to realize that one of the priorities for Christians, and as the church, is the business of proclaiming the Good News of God to the world.

A super salesman once sold a complicated computer and software system to a thriving small business. Three months later the salesman visited his client. “How’s the computer software system working?”

“Magnificently” replied the manager. “And how is business?” asked the salesman. The manager replied, “Oh, we had to give up our business in order to concentrate on running the computer system!”

That could be a parable for the church and we have to be careful that something like that is not happening in the church. I mean we are proficient in congregational care, and in worship. Our music swells, our focus on spiritual practices is growing, our finances are strong and stable, we are engaging in important social justice issues and we are a well-tuned organization.

But we have to be careful we are not missing the core of our mission. Part of our mission is spreading good news, making disciples. We don’t want to close the doors of our business because we are too busy focusing on running the computer system!

Now, I said earlier that evangelism was not in our recent DNA. But that’s not entirely true. There was a time when evangelism was one of the core ministries of Presbyterians.

A couple of years ago, a group of Korean tourists unexpectedly showed up here on a summer afternoon. They wanted to see the church. Seems these were not just tourists. These were Christians from Korea, in fact, Presbyterian Christians. Why were they here? Because a missionary who had been sponsored by this congregation had gone to Korea and taught the faith to their grandparents more than a hundred years ago!

Think about that. It used to be that Presbyterians organized and funded a huge overseas missionary effort. Korea has more Presbyterians now than the United States! For decades, our larger church emphasis, and our local church money supported missionaries. They were

trained and then sent to proclaim the Good News of Christ and organize churches. That is part of our DNA.

But a striking thing happened in the American church. The mission field changed from “over there” to “over here.” And when American culture began to change, as it has since the 1950s, the mission field moved to just outside our front door. The number of people now who do not believe, who are “spiritual” but not religious, (whatever that really means), or those who have no belief or are agnostic, or apathetic, or those who are Christian by birth but practice no faith, has dramatically increased.

Now this is not news for most of us. Go for a walk on Sunday morning; visit the soccer fields, the little league diamonds, or the neighborhood parks and we get it.

The frontier, over there, we used to understand. But since the frontier became our own neighborhood, we have been paralyzed. Part of our paralysis is our fear that evangelism means being pushy or arrogant or intrusive.

III

So the truth is few of us want to be evangelists! For us, faith is personal and private.

And I’ll agree that faith is personal but I’ll challenge you that it is private.

So let me tell what it means for you and me to be an evangelist in the twenty-first century. I promise you will not be standing on the street corner quoting scripture, or knocking on doors and asking “What is the state of your soul?” Rather, for you and me to be sharing the Good News of Christ, evangelists, we simply do this: invite people to church with you. A proclaimer of the Good News means in today’s world. We don’t necessarily have to verbalize our personal faith or have some rehearsed speech. Rather, simply invite your friends to church, your colleagues, your family, your neighbors. I’m not talking about stealing sheep from other churches because the mission field, our workplaces and neighborhoods, are chock- full of people who are on a spiritual search.

You know these people?

They are your friends, colleagues or families who have:

Lost their jobs,

Who are trying to make sense out of life,

Who are suffering from bulimia.

Who are going through a messy divorce.

Who are facing a major life decision.

Who are looking for a positive, encouraging peer group.

Or a place where their children will learn about right and wrong, compassion and love.

There are people who look at a crazy world of mass gun shootings and immoral, power-hungry politicians and think, *where is the hope?*

They are wondering about life and God but no with no real place to ask those questions. And if we invite these folks with a loving and joyful heart, that in and of itself is the most compelling message of all. Why do people come to a church? More than seventy percent say it's because they were invited by a friend!

IV

Now let me tell you why inviting people to church is good theology. It is because our personal faith stories cannot capture the full picture of who God is or how God works. That is the church's story! At church we proclaim God's great love and grace by what we say in worship, music and liturgy, by what we teach and preach, and what we do for the community and for each other. If we want others to experience the Good News of Christ, that happens in a community called the church.

So the mission field has changed. You and I are the new missionaries. We are the inviters, the connectors.

So can we hear Jesus' words as: "Go and make disciples in your city, with your neighbors, in your family and with your friends!"

And you know the most important thing Jesus said with those final instructions? *Lo – I will be with you.*