



# The Trinity Pulpit



## A Message Worth Sharing Matthew 28:16-20

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There is a "Peanuts" comic strip in which Linus is listening carefully as his sister, Lucy, boasts about her religious faith and her potential as an evangelist.

She says to Linus: "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

Linus asks: "How did you do that?"

Lucy replies: "I hit him with my lunch box."

That is how many of us think of evangelism. We struggle with how we are to share the message of the gospel with those around us. Some of our problem is expressed by Communications Professor Robert Don Hughes who, in trying to discern why "the greatest story ever told has rarely been told greatly," suggests that when the culture-at-large thinks of the church, the three images of "Sandals, Candles and Scandals" come to mind.

1. Sandals: "Jesus has usually been presented in films and television as a sandal-wearing, bearded guru who never gets his robe dirty and who's rarely seen from the front. While those around him talk like human beings, he speaks lines from the King James Version in Shakespearean tones" (11).

2. Candles: When we do try to interpret ourselves to the world, we get out the "bells-and-smells" and broadcast our local worship services. "Candles don't come across well on camera, and neither do sermons" (12).

3. Scandals: Tragically, "the electronic church has provided much of the subject material for tabloid television" (13).<sup>1</sup>

Our challenge? To evangelize a world for Christ "when churches are dismissed as no

more than sandals (gentle Jesus, meek and mild), candles (boring preachers lacking style), or scandals (glitzy con men running wild)" (13).

In his book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren tells the story of being named a leader in the younger evangelical movement by Robert Weber. When this occurred McLaren's friend called him and asked if he was not offended by being named an evangelical. In response McLaren identified the reasons why the word evangelical did not offend him. First, he suggests that the word evangelical has been hijacked by a few in our culture. Most people think of evangelicals as some type of conservative voting block and, depending on your politics, you might embrace or reject the label of evangelical with that definition. But what evangelical has meant in the past as defined by McLaren is:

1. People who have a high regard for the Bible.
2. People who believe in a personal conversion experience (i.e. being born again).
3. People who believe in a personal relationship with Jesus.
4. People who want to share their faith.<sup>2</sup>

If this is the proper definition, then most Baptists I know fit well into this category. We are biblical people who believe in a personal conversion of faith and a relationship with Jesus Christ. We also believe that the Bible teaches us to share this experience with others that others might have their own experience with Jesus Christ. That is true evangelism. Yet, due to the images I have already discussed, the church as a whole continues to reject evangelism as a way of life. Today in our *It's Time* series we are looking at the Great Commission and seeking to understand what it means to embrace this command of Jesus with our lives. The Great Commission, as it referred

to, is found in the last few verses of the gospel of Matthew. Similar passages are found in Mark and in the beginning of Acts in the Luke/Acts writings. John is the only gospel writer that does not include it. The setting of the Great Commission is post-resurrection and pre-ascension. It is in the moments between realizing that the Jesus movement is not over with the cross but has been transformed with the resurrection. However, it is also a moment of uncertainty as the disciples learn that Jesus, now resurrected, is not going to remain with them in bodily form but instead ascend to the Father and send to them the power of the Holy Spirit.

It would seem to me that there are many thoughts and emotions with these words of Jesus which we might not clearly see when we remove this statement as a great statement and yet out of context. I am sure that the disciples may have had some of the same questions we have when it comes to sharing our faith. They may have wondered *with whom?* It is one thing to say with everyone, but where do you start with everyone? Everyone has to begin with someone. They may have questioned *how?* What method are they to use to tell this message? Are they to preach? Are they to set up schools? Are they to go door-to-door to strangers? Are they to write books? What is the method of sharing the story? Will they be successful? I am sure they wondered who would receive their message and what their reactions might be. Some of this sounds familiar. We tend to raise those of the first generation of Christians beyond a human standard when in reality they were as much human as we are with questions, fear and doubts. This is also true when it came to sharing the good news.

What does this commission from Jesus tell us about how, with whom and why the message of the gospel should be shared? What does this commission say to our own doubts, questions and fears?

The Great Commission reminds us that the sharing of the gospel should be intentional in our lives. The command begins with "Go!" The way Jesus gives this commandment it is not a suggestion but a command. One of the purposes of our coming to faith is to share that faith with others. We are to go to others.

When we as Christians do not believe evangelism is for us, then we are suggesting one of two things. We are suggesting that we have lost compassion for

others without Christ, or we are saying we lack confidence in our ability to share Christ. The first problem is addressed by intentionality. The first obstacle in sharing the good news is determining the importance of the good news. We have to begin by asking God to grant to us the heart of God who loves all people and is concerned for all people. We need to realize the desperate need of sharing our faith.

Dr. George Braswell quoted some statistics at a recent conference I was attending. Dr. Braswell, who was long time Missions Professor at Southeastern Seminary and is now the Director of the new Global Missions and Cultures Center at Campbell University Divinity School, commented that in the year 1900, Christians made up 31% of the world's population while Islam made up 6%. In 1970, Christians made up 31% of the world population and Islam had grown to 12%. In 2005, Christians made up 31% of the world's population and Islam now boasts 26% and is the fastest growing religion in America along with Mormonism. It is believed that Islam has now passed Judaism in America as the number two religious group. What will it take to convince us that it is time to care and be intentional about sharing our faith with others?



*"The Great Commission reminds us that the sharing of the gospel should be intentional in our lives."*

The Great Commission also reminds us that evangelism is contextual. The command of Jesus is to go be intentional, but many scholars point to the concept that this verse might be better translated, "as you go." It is true that many missions organizations and missionaries have been established and sent under the Great Commission. It is these words of Jesus that have

caused many to leave family and country and go to other lands and other people with the gospel. Now make sure we understand that God is still calling people to go, but Jesus is also calling all of us to share the gospel as we go. This means that evangelism is contextual. You do not share the gospel the same way in all situations and locations.

For many years the mode of evangelism was large crusades, and the revival movement in America was responsible for millions coming to Christ. In many places this method of evangelism is still very effective. In the 1970s the shift changed to a more one-on-one approach. Denominations produced materials like *Evangelism Explosion* which consisted of propositional statements which were meant to create the moment for one to share their faith and to lead others to Christ by the sharing of what the Bible teaches about

salvation. There were many versions of this same method and, again, many came to Christ. God blessed both of these approaches to sharing the good news. They were intentional and effective. However, I would argue that in America today they are no longer contextual. We live in a different culture than those who readily responded to these methods. In the case of revivalism, people are now very skeptical of the church and church leaders. The church in general does not carry the weight it once did in our culture, and thus people responding to a crusade type of program is not as popular as it once was. The door-to-door method of evangelism has become very frowned upon in our culture. Most people in our culture practice what is called *cocooning*. This is the creating of a fortress mentality when it comes to our free time and time at home. I don't want a show of hands, but how many of us screen our calls with an answering machine or caller identification? We seek to control any intrusion upon our time at home. Thus, any unsolicited visit and sometimes phone call is unwanted.

How, then, should we share the gospel in today's American cultural context?

One of the most effective ways is through relationship development. I will speak to this in just a moment. The point, however, needs to be made that taking the gospel to our particular context is what God calls us to do. This means we must get to know the people with whom we work, live and play.

The apostle Paul gives us some of the best examples of sharing the gospel in context as he went from city to city and region to region. If you study Paul you will determine that his language and approach to sharing the good news changes according to whom he is engaging. If he is engaging Jewish people or Jewish converts in the synagogue, we find Paul quoting Old Testament scripture and sharing the good news by revealing Jesus to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament. However, when encountering the philosophers and educated in the market square, we find him not referring to scripture but to reason and philosophy as a way of sharing the truth of Jesus as God's son. Both were effective ways of sharing the gospel, but they required context. We must get to know the culture and the people where we live, work and play if we would be effective in sharing the good news.

Third, we must embrace an evangelism that is holistic

and relational based. Jesus says we are to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all things that he has commanded. If we break this part of the commission down, what we find is a holistic evangelism based on relationships. We are to make disciples not converts. One of our fears is our ability to make converts. One of our problems has been an evangelism that stressed converts and approached evangelism like recruiting someone to our cause. In his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes, "When Christians focus on recruitment alone, the ongoing nurture of relationships and practices in this life becomes nearly irrelevant."



***"The Great Commission of Jesus is not a sales pitch or a recruitment poster. It is an instruction guide for relationship building."***

The Great Commission of Jesus is not a sales pitch or a recruitment poster. It is an instruction guide for relationship building. First, we are to make disciples. A disciple is a follower. If our goal is to make a disciple, then we are not speaking about convincing someone to believe a set of doctrines like we do. We are talking about introducing someone to Jesus so they can choose to follow him. In addition, Jesus says that discipleship of another will require our time and effort.

We are to baptize them, meaning to bring them into the community of faith. We are to make a place for them in our lives. Second, we are to teach them to observe all things. We are to take the time to teach them the ways of Christ. To teach someone the ways of Christ means two things in my mind. First, it means I have to have an ongoing relationship with Christ so I can continue to learn. I cannot teach what I do not know. Second, I have to have an ongoing relationship with others so I can share what God is teaching me. What we have described here in the Great Commission is not a way to make converts but a way of making disciples who become community and family to us.

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us."

In his book on evangelism, *More Ready than You Realize*, Brian McLaren suggests that the time has come for us to count conversations instead of conversions if we are going to make evangelism relational and whole.

We must also realize that evangelism as defined by the Great Commission is not limited. We are told to baptize all nations. *All nations* was a term used to describe all people. *All nations* erased the limitations that we many times put on God's love. God's message is for us and for those who are not of our kind – whatever we might define that to be. It is for those who have a different education, culture, religion, political view, nationality or ethnic background. *All nations* includes all people everywhere. Now to baptize all nations means two things. One, it means to go to all people. For years that meant to leave the comforts of our homes and land and go to another place and people. It still means that, but in our world, especially in the Raleigh-Durham area, to reach all nations means to be intentional in building relationships with the world that has come to us.

We all know of the growing Hispanic population around us. Wake County is one of the fastest growing Hispanic populations in the nation. But that is not the only growing population. Did you know that near the N.C. State campus the Islamic Center boasts close to 4,000 men each and every week who come for Friday prayers and speeches? Did you know that the largest Hindu Temple in North America is located in the RTP? Did you know that in the mountains of Watauga County, North Carolina, there was established in 2004 a 7,000 acre center for Transcendental Meditation where trainees from all over the world come? This group has recently had some tax problems, but they help reveal the trend in American cities large, small, urban and rural. The world is coming to us. Could it be that God has brought the world to Christians in America because we had failed to go to them? I would not put that past the love of God.

To baptize all nations also means to receive them to ourselves and the community of faith. It is important that if God is bringing the nations to us that we make a place for them within our church in America. Is there a place for all nations in Trinity Baptist Church?

Finally, the Great Commission ends with the promise of Jesus. Jesus says, "and I will be with you always until the end of the age." Most scholars agree that Jesus is speaking of being with his disciples until he comes again. So, we can rest assured that Jesus is with us as we go and make disciples. I like the fact that Matthew ends his gospel not with comment but with the words of Jesus. Matthew might be reminding us that even our task of evangelism is not about us, it is about what God is doing through Christ. The last word is not what we are to do but what Jesus is going to do. The last words of Matthew are not about what we have to offer but what Jesus has to offer. I want to suggest that this is the real message of the gospel. It is not about us, our church, who we are, what we can do for anybody or anything else. Ultimately, the gospel is about Jesus who, out of God's wonderful grace, left his eternal home in heaven and became human like you and me and yet was without sin. Jesus taught us how to live in regards to God and each other. He taught us how to face suffering and death itself. Through his sacrifice on the cross he paid the price for our sinfulness, and because of the power of his resurrection we have the gift of his spirit now and the promise of heaven when we die. After everything is finished and done, it finally all comes down to Jesus. That is the last word and that, my friends, is a message worth sharing.



#### References:

- 1 Robert Don Hughes, *Talking to the World in the Days to Come*. Broadman Press, Nashville, TN, 1991.
- 2 Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*. Zondervan, 2004, p.117.



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