

Conflicting Missiologies

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English Protestant Missionary James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) is credited with the coining of the popular catchphrase, “The Great Commission,” although it is widely acknowledged that the actual origin of the term among Christians predates Taylor. Heeding the Lord’s directive (Mt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), the people of God had been engaging God’s mission long before mission societies were constituted and the Church became institutionalized in its historic and contemporary forms.

Especially in the two centuries that precede our generation, the Christian Church and her auxiliaries launched concerted efforts at witnessing the Gospel throughout the world with greater vigor and intentionality than all the activities put together throughout all the generations preceding them. Following the model of early apostles and disciples, Christians as individuals and in groups caught on to the mission vision the Lord had cast for His Church. Mission societies would be formed, with mainline denominations endorsing, sponsoring, and partnering with them toward the common cause of Gospel witnessing. Diverging from the centuries-old tradition of Christian missionaries from the Western hemisphere reaching out to the East, mission in the twenty-first century has become a global partnership among like-minded peoples and communities, Christians from all over the world together sharing personnel, resources, and methods for the common goal of making disciples for Christ.

Missionary Taylor dedicated fifty-one years of his life in China in the service of spreading the Gospel among the residents of China’s interior. At Taylor’s initiative, more than eight hundred missionaries went to China over five decades. They were instrumental in establishing thousands of preaching stations and hundreds of schools, at the same time engendering indigenous leadership for the missionary task in a huge country home to a fifth of the world’s population. Taylor’s unrelenting zeal for proclaiming Christ before all peoples, along with his erudite sensitivity to indigenous customs and cultures, brought him the recognition as a modern replica of the biblical apostle Paul. Taylor’s prototypes may be seen in the lives and services of numerous other missionaries preceding him, such as Roberto Di Nobili (1577–1656), Bartholomew Ziegenbalg (1682–1719), and William Carey (1761–1834).

Disagreements refuse to go away on how best to unpack the grammar of the biblical texts upon which the Great Commission has been founded. Questions continue to arise whether the Lord first addressed these words just to the eleven disciples who surrounded Him at the time of speaking or if, indeed, they were directed to everyone who would follow Him, beginning with His disciples.

Regardless of how translations read, the Greek text of Matthew 28:19 hinges on the single principal verb, “make disciples.” The verb appears in its Aorist imperative form, and its direct object signifies the people of all nations. Historically, heeding the Lord’s directive, Christendom has been on a journey to proclaim in His name repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations, beginning with Jerusalem (Lk 24:47). The Great Commission has since propelled Christian people in the millions to reach out beyond their borders for the sake of Christ and His Gospel.

Gospel proclamation, according to N. T. Wright, is enabling people to hear the good news of “life after life after death.”¹ Wright argues that, by raising Jesus from the dead, in Jesus of Nazareth, “God has brought his future, his putting-the-world-to-rights-future, into the present,” all of which is encapsulated in the prayer the Lord taught His people to pray.² When we pray “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are praying for “bread and forgiveness” at the same time, Wright argues. In that vein, Christian discipling is God’s instrument in our world for a demonstration of His forgiveness, life, and salvation. The proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord is the incarnation life in its fullness and abundance to all who are brought into the household of faith (Jn 10:10). Christian mission invests equally in the proclamation of salvation and in its demonstration in serving neighbors in their bodily, social, and material needs.

The missionaries of any time do not do otherwise. Christian discipling involves empowering those who are taught to live life in its fullness in Christ. The Lord’s witnesses care equally for the body and soul of their listeners, as the Early Church and the pioneers in mission have done. Reassured by the hope of the resurrection, Christians demonstrate before the world the reason for the hope they have in Christ, whom they honor in their hearts as holy.

If it appears that evangelism worldwide has plateaued somewhat, without a doubt the Lord continues to add to His Church people from all nations in His own gracious and mysterious ways, even though conflicting opinions persist, not only in understanding the mission of the Church, but also in the ways in which the Church encounters the world. Global Christianity is having an impact on our world in new ways, as the Gospel demonstrates its power in previously impenetrable communities through insider movements and missional communities anchored exclusively in the claims that Christ has made on their lives. These communities are seeking not bread from others but only to partner with other Christians in the Gospel. Christians globally are searching for methods of communicating the Gospel holistically, covering all the senses of body and soul.

Confessing Christ at any time is a scandal. The claims that the Lord and giver of life has made on the lives of all people by His life, death, and resurrection have no impact on un-regenerated reason. For the repentant sinner, however, Christ confessed brings to life a brand-new way of understanding human living in its ritual, ethical, social, and experiential dimensions. In this issue of the journal, we encounter how

spiritism is at work in our world today, even in American Christian households. Patterns of religion and religious practices have been changing, all too often bereft of their traditional moorings. As conversions occur, we pray only that the God who begins His good work in people will bring with that experience a baptismal renewal of life and service in the world holistically.

Christian faith is fundamentally in conflict with culture, any culture. If the Reformers strove to free the Gospel from the institutional culture of the time, today Christ's Church strives to relate the Gospel to the culture of our time, penetrating and transforming it for the sake of Christ and His kingdom on earth.

In India, for example, one of the major challenges that Christian witnessing faced early on was that it attracted primarily the disenfranchised and the marginalized of the community, with limited access to the cultural mainstream. In spite of intentional efforts to increase social mobility and effect cultural transformation that have been an integral part of Christian mission, as the lives of Carey and Ziegenbalg have shown, Christians in India continue to retain their cultural and national identities as Indians. Yet, they strive to overcome socio-economic conflicts by putting their faith to work in acts of love and service to others, regardless of the taboos that persist in the community.

As in the first century, the Lord of the Church continues to add to the household of faith peoples and nations of the world well beyond human reasoning and imagination. Through the Great Commission, the Church today participates in God's mission for the salvation of His people throughout the world.

Endnotes

¹ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2008), 197.

² *Ibid.*, 215.