

Lutheran Mission Matters

Winner of
Concordia Historical Institute's
2017 Award of Commendation



Volume XXVI, No. 1 (Issue 52) May 2018

Encountering Mission

Applying the Great Commission

Derrick Miliner

Abstract: Applying the Great Commission has always been a challenge for some churches. In my twenty-nine years of working in the Church, I have seen the Church struggle with applying the words of Christ “go into all nations.” I think we are selective in the nations we go into. In this article, I discuss a simple way to apply the Great Commission. From my perspective in this article, Jesus said to make it as simple as He initially sent the disciples with nothing in their hands; just faith in Him. I, too, think we should have faith and go, close to our churches. Stop passing our close neighbors to reach the perfect neighbor.

During my past twenty years of being a member of a congregation in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I have seen us develop several strategies on how to implement the Great Commission of Jesus Christ found in Matthew 28:18–20. I have listened to several reasons why we do not intentionally go into our neighborhoods and invite our neighbors to church.

Several theologians have described the Great Commission “as you go on your way” you should disciple, baptize, and teach. My goal in this article is to present another approach to carrying out the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. My primary objective is to present this simple way for us to consider: We should walk into our neighborhoods a half a mile east, north, south, and west around our churches with our strong Lutheran confessional faith without fear of how people will respond, and I believe this will provide us a real application of Matthew 28:18–20. We are witnessing in other countries, but I think we should stop passing by our neighbors close to our church and invite them.



Pastor Derrick Miliner is the associate pastor at Our Savior Lutheran Church in Laurel, Maryland. Derrick has a Bachelor's degree in healthcare management, a graduate degree in telecommunications management, a lay ministry certification, and almost finished the Specific Ministry Pastoral certification. derrick@oslclaurel.org

I don't think any special training is needed if one pays attention to the words of Matthew 28: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (NIV).

The first question I have is whether we can we approach this task of making disciples, baptizing, and teaching Christ in a simpler way. We have tried several training programs to carry out the Great Commission. All these training programs have positive attributes and ways that help us share the Gospel. I still ask the question, are we hesitant to invite the neighbors that don't look like the majority of us sitting in the pews? When we are going on our way to and from the church, are we intentionally passing by our neighbors for a better neighbor to invite?

I still ask the question, are we hesitant to invite the neighbors that don't look like the majority of us sitting in the pews? When we are going on our way to and from the church, are we intentionally passing by our neighbors for a better neighbor to invite?

Reverend Ben Haupt said it best for me in his sermon titled "Paul's Alls, Luther, and the Discovery of America": "When the neighborhood begins to change around the church, it's easier just to drive into the sanctuary parking lot, past the changing neighborhood and pretend that we're back in the 1950s when the neighborhood was as white as Andy Griffith and Beaver Cleaver."¹

I'm making some assumptions here; we sometimes are afraid to invite all people surrounding us. I have noticed in the urban and suburban churches, as the demographics of the traditional Lutheran people have changed, that we don't go out and welcome the neighbors in. We are selective in the target areas of ministry. I find some fear in some of the churched people when asked to walk into the neighborhoods that they are not accustomed to. I go back to the question of whether we are looking for a specific type of person—Christian or non-Christian—who we want to be in our church. I conclude my assumptions with a question: Why are we making the task of the Great Commission so difficult?

As I ponder the existence and continuance of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, I ask all of you, how important is the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to us? Have we looked at all the models of reaching out to our neighbors, intentional evangelism, and walking into our neighborhoods around us to see what is working? What would we have to do to settle this question? I think the question can be

answered simply: Follow Jesus' instruction to the fullest extent that we can. He made it very simple by saying, "Go."

So, again, my reasoning for writing is to tell you what Jesus said, and that was simply to go. Jesus gave the disciples a model to follow for going in Luke 9:1–6:

And [Jesus] called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and He sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal. And He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money; and do not have two tunics. And whatever house you enter, stay there, and from there depart. And wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.' And they departed and went through the villages, preaching the gospel and healing everywhere. (ESV)

Jesus explains it so plainly how to go and implement the Great Commission. Why do we confuse it? Why do we have training programs to teach what to say, where to go, which demographic reports to read, which group of people we desire in our church, and all the other targeted aspects of the neighborhood? I think it goes back to what I stated earlier: We sometimes are afraid to invite all people surrounding us.

The evidence I have seen of sharing the Great Commission says we are mediocre at best. Author Michael Parrot gives us these statistics:

- 95% of all Christians have never won a soul to Christ.
- 80% of all Christians do not consistently witness for Christ.
- Less than 2% are involved in the ministry of evangelism.
- 71% do not give toward the financing of the Great Commission.

One particular denomination did a survey on its leadership ministries. The results are as follows:

- 63% of the leadership in this denomination, including deacons and elders, have not led one stranger to Jesus in the last two years through the method of "Go Ye" evangelism.
- 49% of the leadership ministries spend zero time in an average week ministering outside of the church.
- 89% of the leadership ministries have zero time reserved on their list of weekly priorities for going out to evangelize.
- 99% of the leadership ministries believe that every Christian, including leadership, has been commanded to preach the gospel to a lost world.

- 97% believe that if the leadership had a greater conviction and involvement in evangelism, that it would be an example for the church to follow.
- 96% of the leadership believe their churches would have grown faster if they would have been more involved in evangelism.

Because of this, our results in evangelism have been mediocre at best.²

As we all know, there are different models of sharing the Gospel, failed models of sharing the Gospel, and there are some churches that are lukewarm, hot, and then cold again. I think we need to become very hot with the key concepts of Matthew 28:18–20. Jesus tells the disciples to go into all nations, which was different than the first mission when He said only go to the lost sheep of Israel. This Great Commission included everyone; now contrast this against what we do today. We selectively study our area before we go. Is this what Jesus said? Study the demographics, look at the income, and look at who they are before we go? No, He said “all nations.”

His instructions were not a set of alternatives, not a set of new concepts, terms that we should say when we get out into our neighborhoods. He simply said, “Go,” and as Luke’s Gospel said, He gave them power and authority. We, too, have the same power and authority to proclaim the kingdom of God.

The evidence to me in the Scriptures implies that we should go and continually go with the love, grace, and faith of Jesus Christ into our nations and the neighborhoods around us. My thoughts on the implications and consequences are that, if we don’t apply the Great Commission to our neighborhoods around us, we will shrink in size. We must get out of the pews, chairs, and recliners and invite all in. Our synod has responded with ways we can continue the Great Commission through evangelism and outreach. I wholeheartedly agree with this approach of reaching out as we always have. I conclude simply with the word of Jesus: “Go.” Use the model Jesus instructed the disciples to use, which I think applies to us today.

I conclude simply with the word of Jesus: “Go.” Use the model Jesus instructed the disciples to use, which I think applies to us today.

Endnotes

¹ Ben Haupt, “Paul’s Alls, Luther, and the Discovery of America,” *Lutheran Mission Matters*, 25, no. 2 (November 2017): 209–210.

² Michael Parrott, *Street Level Evangelism, Where is the Space for the Local Evangelist* (Spokane, WA: Acts Evangelism, 1993), 9–11, <https://bible.org/illustration/evangelism-statistics>.