

Messiah Moravian Church  
June 4, 2023  
Trinity Sunday, Year A  
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Matthew 28: 16-20

## ANOTHER GREAT COMMISSION

The passage we just read is very troubling to some Christians. Sadly, during the last two thousand years, the Church has committed atrocities on native people, all in the name of following Jesus's command.

Forced conversions, colonization and the Doctrine of Discovery have their roots in a misunderstanding of Jesus's command. These words became the justification for The Doctrine of Discovery in 1493, when Pope Alexander VI issued a Papal Bull that gave complete license to European Christians to colonize the world. The Church granted white European Christians the right to claim, seize, conquer, and "Christianize" any and all lands inhabited by people who were not Christian.

Some commentators have gone so far as to argue that The Great Commission birthed white supremacy. Colonizing became Europe's preferred method of evangelizing, and in Jesus' name indigenous people were slaughtered or subjugated. The Doctrine of Discovery not only justified the dehumanization of those people who lived in lands beyond Europe but also sanctioned the notion of white supremacy in the so-called "civilizing" of North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, Asia, and other points in-between.

Vast numbers of Christians to this day believe that their particular interpretation of the faith is the right and exclusive path to God. Those who refuse to accept, believe, and enter into their religion will be damned for all eternity. Do you believe that is really what Jesus had in mind?

Within the larger context of Matthew's gospel, are there other kinder, less coercive interpretations behind The Great Commission?

First of all, did you notice that phrase in verse 17, a phrase I have overlooked the many times I have read this passage. When the disciples meet Jesus on the mountain, "they worshipped him, but some doubted." This translation, which is fairly common among most versions, implies that among the eleven there were some who worshipped and some who doubted. But the Greek doesn't really indicate the idea of "some." Instead, it seems to imply is that among all of those disciples present, there was both faith and doubt.

Why would Matthew include a phrase that might be potentially discouraging to new converts? Perhaps he realized that doubt is not an act of unfaithfulness; it is an integral part of a growing faith. Yet how many people have been shamed by or discouraged from asking honest questions about their doubts?

Next, Jesus talks about all authority that he has been granted in heaven and on earth. This seems a bit odd on the surface. Why does the risen Christ show up and immediately talk about authority? Perhaps there are at least two reasons. First, religious leaders have asked him that question before because Jesus is teaching and behaving in ways that challenged traditional religious conventions. Who empowered him to do such a thing? Also, Jesus is calling his disciples to a controversial task, and someone might ask them, "Who gave you authority to do this?" The answer is the Jesus who has all authority.

Finally, Jesus asks his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. What did he have in mind? Did he imagine all the suffering that it has been unleashed throughout Christian history?

In Matthew 10 we will find an interesting contradiction to this command. Here Jesus sends the twelve out to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to invite others to join.

*Jesus sent these twelve out and commanded them, "Don't go among the Gentiles or into a Samaritan city. Go instead to the lost sheep, the people of Israel. (Matthew 10:5-6, CEB)*

Here Jesus's vision of his kingdom is for Israel, and Gentiles and Samaritans are plainly excluded. What happened between Matthew 10 and 28 that changed Jesus's original mission?

In Matthew 15 Jesus had an experience that may have changed his mind. He encounters a Gentile woman whose faith was so compelling--even after he called her a "dog"--that he could not refuse her cry for help. He healed her daughter and went on to heal and feed a large group of Gentiles. Could that unexpected transformative experience have changed Jesus's understanding of his mission?

In that context, what if the Great Commission isn't a command to convert the world to Christianity, or else? After all, God isn't a Christian. Neither was Jesus or his first followers. Christianity as a separate religion from Judaism seems to have happened sometime in the 80s, 50 or so years after Jesus's death.

What if the real commission is for the inclusion of Gentiles into the growing community of Jesus's disciples? One of the major themes of Matthew's gospel is the welcoming of Gentiles into this new offshoot of Judaism. Tragically, ironically, the original Great Commission was intended to move us beyond the boundaries of insider/outsider, clean/unclean, Jew/Gentile that divided people. Yet in our practice of it, it has become a tool for exclusion. Instead of being a reminder that God's love will always compel us toward inclusion and generosity, it has become a source of exclusivism and harm.

By fostering a sense of exclusivity and exceptionalism the Church has historically often engendered a sense of entitled white privilege by claiming authority from Jesus to convert and colonize nations in his name.

So, on this Trinity Sunday, when the Church celebrates its creeds, let's look at the very first creed quoted by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Church in Galatia.

Most scholars believe that Paul's letter to the Galatians was written only 15-20 years after the death of Jesus. They now believe that the Apostle Paul did not actually write the words of the first Creed, but rather quoted them from well-known liturgical practices of the very earliest followers of Jesus to proclaim the essence of the Jesus movement.

New Testament scholar Stephen J. Patterson has studied early manuscripts in an attempt to uncover the words that the Paul quoted and adapted of that first Christian creed found in Galatians 3:28, which states:

"You are all children of God. There is no Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male and female, for you are all one." Most likely, this creed was recited as a new convert arose from his or her baptism.

Even this fledging Jesus movement knew how humans so easily resort to tribalism, and they understood well that race, class, and gender are typically used to divide humans into *us* and *them* to the advantage of *us*. But the evolving Jesus movement declared in their creed that there is no *us*, no *them*. We are all children of God. The Jesus movement was about solidarity, not cultural obliteration.

Imagine a horribly downtrodden and oppressed people hearing that they too are "Children of God." There is no race (Jew or Greek), no class (slave or free), no gender (male or female). In God's eyes all are equal, no exceptions. Race, class and gender cannot somehow purchase a first-class ticket into the Kingdom of God. Now imagine a misguided white, privileged male hearing that your race, class and gender are of no account, for all are equal, all are God's children. Sadly, those are fighting words for far too many people these days.

Converting others to Christianity raises a fundamental question about whether religious diversity is a reality to be celebrated or an obstacle to be overcome. What if Christians aren't called to the task of converting everyone to Christianity, but instead to the task of including anyone and everyone whose faith resonates with Jesus's message? What a different, wonderful world this would be.