

STUDY 10

The Church and the Gospel in History

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My brief: Missionary history post William Carey and the scope of Matthew 28 as a legalistic force in Australia.

The 1950s demonstrated highly emotive missionary interest from interdenominational 'faith' mission societies who publicised the 'foreign fields' by appeals for personal commitment at Keswick-type conventions and youth rallies. I am not criticising such gatherings for they must be seen in their 'euphoric' historic settings, and numerous young people and ex-servicemen and women responded. NSW Katoomba Conventions in my late teens; missionary emphasis with appeal. Eyes closed, hand up if you will go, stand, come forward. Stand if prepared to go if called; come forward. Took courage to remain seated!! SA Charismatic convention; two thirds of God's name is GO!!

It is important for historians not to be so enamoured with the reformers and missionary leaders of the past that they ignore the obvious failures and blind spots evident along the winding history of the Christian Church. It is also important not to be so critical of the past that we see nothing redeemable in the lives and methodology of those who have preceded us.¹

John Piper wrote:

it is possible to be distracted from God in trying to serve God. Martha-like we neglect the one thing needful and soon begin to present God as busy and fretful as we are. A. W. Tozer warned us about this: We commonly represent God as a busy, eager, somewhat frustrated father hurrying about seeking help to carry out His benevolent plan to bring peace and salvation to the world . . . Too many missionary appeals are based upon this fancied frustration of almighty God.²

What is History? History is a researcher's interpretation of data, it is not fact. While 'no historian can escape bias altogether . . . bias need not extinguish a historian's critical powers'.³

¹ E. W. Lutzer in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, eds M. I. Klauber & S. M. Manetsch (B & H Publishing, Nashville, 2008), p. x.

² J. Piper, *Let the Nations be Glad* (Baker, Michigan, 2010), p. 37, quotes T. Wells, *A Vision for Missions* (Banner of Truth, Carlisle, 1985), p. 35.

³ D. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Baker, Michigan, 1990), pp. 6–7. See also, H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (Fontana, 1960).

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1. THE CONTEXTS OF CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS IN AUSTRALIA⁴

Australia was discovered (invaded) and founded during the 18th century age of discovery and was to benefit from the missionary expansion of the 19th century; a result of subsequent European expansion; and mid-eighteenth century revivals. The industrial revolution in England began a not always beneficial effect on society. Thousands out of work: flooded burgeoning cities: crime: overcrowded gaols: Americans rebelled. The 18th century French Revolution and war with France also saw widespread revival in Britain, Europe and America; Wesley, Whitfield, Wilberforce, Newton and Edwards. S.P.C.K. 1698, L.M.S. 1795, C.M.S. 1799. Influenced by the Moravians, by the life and writings of John Eliot and David Brainerd and inspired by the journals of James Cook's voyages, the impoverished Baptist pastor/cobbler William Carey, born 250 years ago this year, penned an 87-page apologia for foreign missions, *An Inquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. Carey believed he was 'called' but his wife did not. He left with his family for India in 1793 as the first B.M.S. missionary. Carey's sense of urgency influenced Hudson Taylor, affirmed the sovereignty of God and stressed God's plan to use means, emphasising we are the means. He took issue with hyper-Calvinism and the prevailing Reformation and Puritan view that the 'Great Commission' was restricted to the apostles, as also, *Lo, I am with you always . . . and not to us*.⁵

2. MATTHEW 28:16–20

Verse 18: '*All authority*', Jesus is making clear that the limitations that applied throughout the incarnation no longer apply to him. He has supreme authority throughout the universe. From *Therefore* onwards, the Greek text contains only one true imperative; *make disciples*, the main verb. Other verbals are participles and literally translate as 'having gone', 'baptizing', and 'teaching'. The first one, *poreuthentes*, an aorist participle, normally signifies time prior to the main verb, thus 'having gone' or 'when you have gone'. This assumes that the disciples of Jesus are already on the way based on his previous directions in Matthew's Gospel. Linguistically there is a big BUT, that is, it is not uncommon in Greek for the participles to absorb the thrust of the mood of the main verb, in which case 'having gone' would legitimately be 'Go'. That the great majority of published translations give 'Go' indicates that leading scholars in translation think that way. This could apply also to the other two supplementary participles, 'baptise' and 'teach'. Meaning these are not options, but mandatory. However, the continuous sense of the present participle is a good reason to leave those two as participles in English, emphasising that the baptising and teaching is a vital part of 'making disciples'. Returning to the 'Go', the same participle in its feminine form is found in Matthew 28; where it is apparent that it must agree with its main verb 'tell', as 'go quickly and tell'. Why

⁴ Rob Linn, NCTM, Australian history lectures, 1985 & 1991.

⁵ M. D. Sills, *The Missionary Call* (Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2008), p. 68; S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (Penguin Books, London, 1987), pp. 222–8; H. R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964), pp. 16–27; Taylor visited Melbourne and Adelaide in 1890.

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change to something different in verse 19? Both verses are telling someone to get on with it! In verse 7, it is the ladies to go and tell the twelve; in verse 19, the disciples to go and make more disciples.⁶ Verse 20: *And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age*. ‘Behold’, i.e. pay attention, take into consideration, the word is to arouse faith! Debates continue as to whether there is ‘a specific or general missionary call’. My understanding presumes a going, as the King is going! We are not doing something for God! He is doing something in and through us. The overall scriptural emphasis of ‘sent’ in John 20:21, perfect tense; linked with John 17:18 ties in with Genesis 12:3, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 2 and 3. Jesus will ascend to the Father and remains the ‘sent one’, for his mission continues through the disciples and his church, so we continue his work not begin a new one. Matthew’s gospel closes in a blaze of glory.⁷

A survey of nineteenth and twentieth century missionary gatherings would reveal numerous appeals for service using the ‘Great Commission’ to invoke youthful response. The writings of John R. Mott in 1900 and John Stott in 1992 continued the Great Commission emphasis. The 1910 Edinburgh Missionary Conference, chaired by U.S. Methodist layman Mott, was driven by the watchword; ‘The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation’. The first of its eight assigned commissions stated: ‘1. Carrying the gospel to all the non-Christian world’. Obligation and urgency were paramount; but the Great War interrupted all plans until 1921 and the Second War thwarted further work until 1948. My point is not to downgrade such scholars or Conferences but to question the method if emotionalism or guilt was the motivation. ‘Matthew 28:18–20 has to be interpreted *against the background of Matthew’s gospel as a whole* and unless we keep this in mind we shall fail to understand it. No exegesis of the “Great Commission” divorced from its moorings in this gospel can be valid’.⁸

3. WHY DID CHRISTIANITY COME TO AUSTRALIA?

Plans for a chaplain came through the Eclectic Society and correspondence between William Wilberforce and William Pitt the Younger, resulted in an official ‘evangelical’ chaplain, Richard Johnson, sailing with the First Fleet, directed at the colonisers, not to missionary endeavours among the indigenous population. NSW was to be a government colony with secular aims, which is not to deny a religious context, but Governor Phillip wanted moral sermons.⁹ Botany Bay was a mainly Irish Catholic convict colony, described by Johnson as ‘the most godless people he had ever seen . . . lost to all sense of virtue, and abandoned to every species of wickedness’. Although the European colonisation coincided with the rise of the modern Protestant

⁶ L. L. Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (IVP, Leicester, 1992), p. 746; Correspondence from Ray Laird, former Principal of BCSA; also C. Rogers, ‘The Great Commission’ (*Biblica Sacra*), July 1973; pp. 258–67.

⁷ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John* (John Murray, London, 1937), p. 294; see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (IVP, Leicester, 1991), p. 649; C. Wright, *The Mission of God* (IVP, London, 2006), pp. 125–6.

⁸ J. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (IVP, Leicester, 1992), p. 329; D. J. Bosch, *The Transforming Mission* (Orbis, New York, 1991), p. 57.

⁹ K. J. Cable, *Religion in Colonial New South Wales* (Baptist Historical Society, Sydney, 1993), p. 3; K. J. Cable, *Richard Johnson (1753-1827)*, ADB, vol. 2, I–Z, gen. ed. D. Pike (MUP, 1967), pp. 17–19.

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missionary movement, ‘the missionary movement virtually ignored Australia’.¹⁰ Both the Johnsons and Marsdens showed concern to Indigenous people and but there was no established mission, although Marsden formed an Australian Auxiliary of CMS in 1825, ‘having as its chief object a ministry to aborigines’. Both the parent CMS founded in 1799 and the local Auxiliary regarded Matthew’s ‘Great Commission’ and John 20:21–23 as its Biblical basis.¹¹

4. INDIGENOUS MISSIONS

The British planners and ‘invaders’ gave little attention to the rights of Indigenous occupation apart from high-sounding rhetoric. Early penal settlement years were unbalanced with convicts being the majority and men outnumbering women, who were all convicts except for some officers’ wives. Attitudes that Christianity and God and were ‘English,’ an abuse of culture, rivalry for land and water, plus brutal exploitation of women, defied the missionary concern of Samuel Marsden and others. ‘The almost uniform reaction of observers of Aboriginal customs was one of disgust and contempt for such apparently wretched specimens of humanity—if they were human at all’.¹² The view of some clergy was: ‘Aborigines were degraded descendants of Ham, almost removed from the reach of the gospel’. By the time South Australia was settled in 1836 there were no discernible changes in attitudes to Aboriginal people. Rob Linn adds to the overall picture in his graphic portrayal of explorers, missionaries, conflict, disease and gospel opposition in describing the work of missionary George Taplin with the Ngarrindjeri in South Australia.¹³ Savagery and betrayal in Van Diemen’s Land, the silence of clergy regarding atrocities and the dumping of remaining indigenous people on desolate Flinders Island deafened the gospel. In general, efforts by LMS Congregational missionary Lancelot Threlkeld, and CMS work at Wellington were ‘killed’ by the personal failures of various workers and desecration of sacred places. ‘Most early Australian missionaries believed a nomadic life-style and Christianity to be incompatible.’¹⁴ By contrast, the 120 years from the 1850s revealed significant ministry by the Presbyterians in all mainland states and in Tasmania. In 1859, Presbyterians and the Church of England invited Moravian missionaries, who had a deep zeal to share the gospel with all people, to Victoria. The Moravians, linked to Jan Hus and Nicholas Von Zinzendorf, later established Ebenezer Mission by the Wimmera River. Conversions, baptisms, industry training in garden, orchard and sheep, plus a church building typified the mission work but a declining population led to closure in 1902. Some Indigenous missions

¹⁰ S. Piggin, *Spirit of a Nation: The Story of Australia’s Christian Heritage* (Strand Publ., Sydney, 2004), p. 11; J. Harris, *One Blood* (Albatross, Sydney, 1990), p. 40.

¹¹ A. D. Deane, ‘The Contribution of the New Evangelical Movements of the Late Nineteenth Century to Evangelical Enterprise in Australia, 1870-1920’ (MA Thesis, University of Sydney, 1983), p. 74; K. Cole, *A History of the Church Missionary Society of Australia* (CMS Historical Publications, 1971), p. 1; K. Cole, *From Mission to Church: The CMS Mission to the Aborigines of Arnhem Land 1908–1985* (c. 1985), pp. 10–11.

¹² I. Breward, *Australia: ‘The Most Godless Place Under Heaven?’* (LPH, Adelaide, 1991), p. 6.

¹³ R. Linn, *A Diverse Land: A History of the Lower Murray, Lakes and Coorong* (S.A. Meningie Historical Society Inc., 1988), pp. 41–63.

¹⁴ J. Harris, *One Blood*, pp. 44, 48 & 84–126; I. Breward, *A History of the Australian Churches* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1993), p. 34; J. Harris, ‘L. E. Threlkeld,’ *The Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography*, ed. B. Dickey (EHA, Sydney, 1994), pp. 371–2.

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have suffered from harmful white influence, isolation, communication issues, employment problems, cultural ignorance, criticism from their own people; whereas other Indigenous folk have embraced the gospel and are thankful for those who have been sent with the message of true freedom.¹⁵ Similar descriptions by Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans and interdenominational missions can be cited. The twentieth century also witnessed the emphasis of Australia as a sending country, particularly following the visit of Hudson Taylor in 1890. The commencement of Bible training institutes and the development of missions to the 'foreign' field gathered emphasis, with the 'Great Commission' as the essential emphasis to 'Go' while there is still time to reach the lost. Stuart Piggin quotes Rev. Silas Mead who was a significant Baptist missions enthusiast in South Australia:

Our young people must be drenched with missionary knowledge. Our Christian Endeavour members must be saturated with Missionary enthusiasm that they shall cease to ask—'Ought someone to go?' but rather—'Dare I stay at home and fail to listen to the Saviour's command to go into all the heathen lands and proclaim His salvation to the ends of the earth?'¹⁶

However, 'the Great Commission is an expanding and self-replicating task, not a ticking clock for the end times'.¹⁷ The 'Great Commission' must be in partnership with the 'Great Commandment' (John 13:34–35).

5. CONCLUSION

'Jesus did not command His church to go plant churches—even biblically sound ones. He commanded us to make disciples and teach them to observe all that He has commanded . . . Planting churches is part of the process, but the emphasis is on making disciples and teaching them'.¹⁸ 1956 Auca missionary martyr Jim Elliot stated when he encouraged young people to go to the mission fields: 'We don't need a call; we need a kick in the pants'.¹⁹ Some may regard Acts 1:8 as Luke's version of Matthew's conclusion, but the emphasis is not 'Go' but, *You will receive power . . . and you will be my witnesses*. 'Luke fixes our attention, not upon an external voice, but upon an internal Spirit . . . Luke speaks not of men who, being what they were, strove to obey the last orders of a beloved Master, but of men who, receiving a Spirit, were driven by that Spirit to act in accordance with the nature of that Spirit'.²⁰

¹⁵ W. (Bill) Edwards, 'Reflections on Presbyterian Aboriginal Mission in Australia,' ed. M. Hutchinson & G. Treloar, *This Gospel Shall Be Preached: Essays on the Australian Contribution to World Mission* (CSAC, Sydney, 1998), pp. 193–213.

¹⁶ S. Piggin 'Introduction: The Reflex Impact of Missions on Australian Christianity', eds M. Hutchinson & G. Treloar (1998), p. 9.

¹⁷ C. Wright (2006), p. 35.

¹⁸ M. D. Sills, *Reaching and Teaching* (Chicago, Moody, 2010), p. 149.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1958), p. 54.

²⁰ R. Allen, *The Ministry of the Spirit; Selected Writings of Roland Allen*, ed. D. M. Paton (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972), p. 5.