

Educating Disciples for Missions

by John Vissers

The Great Commission includes teaching, and teaching is essential to the mission of the church, as it educates and equips disciples for mission.

Duration: 26:17

Scripture: Matthew 28:16, Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, John 20:21-23

Topics: "Discipleship"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of teaching and mission in the Christian faith. He highlights that teaching is a command from Jesus himself, as seen in Matthew's Gospel. The teaching ministry of the church is not just about acquiring knowledge, but about forming disciples in relationship to Christ and to one another. The speaker challenges the modern and Western view of education as simply the communication of information, and instead emphasizes that teaching in the New Testament is about formation and being conformed to the reality of Jesus Christ.

Transcript

And in a way, I'd like to talk to you a little bit tonight about the whole area of education and teaching, mission, and discipleship. And I'd like for us to read our text for tonight, and it's Matthew 28. The familiar words of the Great Commission, well-known words to you, I think, and to all of us, but words that I'd like to focus on this evening, and perhaps in just a slightly different way than what we usually focus in on in this passage.

But let's hear God's Word tonight, reading from Matthew 28, and starting at verse 16. Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.

And Jesus came and said to them, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, 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 that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

The phrase that I want to focus on this evening is that little phrase in verse 20, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. Let's pray and seek the Lord's blessing as we come to the Word this evening. Gracious God, as we come to expound and teach your Word, we pray indeed that your Word

would be our rule, that your Holy Spirit would be our teacher, and that your greater glory would be our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Matthew 28, verses 16 to 20 contain, as you well know, what we refer to as the Great Commission. After the resurrection of our Lord Jesus from the dead, and before his ascension into heaven, to the right hand of God the Father, Jesus commissioned the eleven disciples to 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 as someone has said, no part of the Bible has done more to give Christians the vision of a worldwide church than this text. But there's one part of the text that we often skip over, that we often move through very quickly. Because in verse 20, Jesus also says that the commission includes teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And we might well ask, what is this command to teach doing in a text about mission? If you think about it, most of the time in the church, we deal with the teaching ministry of the church, and we deal with the missions ministry of the church as two separate and two distinct ministries. The teaching ministry of the church is, we think about the education of our children, our young people, men and women, adults in the Christian faith and in the Christian life.

We want them to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. We want our young people to grow in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And so we think of that as the educational, the teaching ministry of the church, which takes place within the four walls of the church.

And then when we think about the missions ministry of the church, we think about going out beyond those walls and sharing the gospel with others in word and deed. Reaching out in evangelism and in action to bring men and women to Jesus so that they might meet him for the first time. And we think of these as two distinct, as two separate ministries, which ought not to be confused one with the other.

But we might well ask, are these two separate and distinct ministries which should not be confused? Well, not according to Jesus. Because Jesus, in fact, is more holistic. And Jesus has a more integrated approach, and I might add, I think, a more realistic approach because according to Jesus, the teaching ministry of the church is an integral part of the church's mission.

And the mission of the church is the purpose and goal of the church's teaching. The mission of the church includes teaching, and the teaching of the church educates and equips and empowers disciples for mission. It is a circle, in a very real sense, which is to remain unbroken.

Let's try to step into that circle this evening and try to understand why teaching and mission are so integral to one another. Well, notice in the first instance that this is a command of our Lord, a command to teach. Matthew's gospel, it's interesting, Matthew's gospel, in fact, is the only one of the four gospels to include teaching in the Great Commission as a command in this way.

If you go to Luke 24, for example, verse 47, you read there that the disciples are commissioned to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nations in the name of Jesus. And if you go to the book of Acts, and Acts chapter 1 and verse 8, you read there that the disciples are told that they will be witnesses to the Easter events, that they will be witnesses to Jesus and his resurrection, empowered by the Holy Spirit. And then if you go to John chapter 20, verses 21 to 23, the disciples there are promised the Holy Spirit and sent out into the world by the risen Christ with the authority to forgive sins.

And then if you come to Mark chapter 16 and verse 15, you do find there something that comes closest to Matthew 28 when it says that the disciples are commissioned to proclaim good news, and Mark uses a word there for proclaim, which might be used interchangeably with the word teach, and he uses them interchangeably in his gospel. But it's interesting to note that it's Matthew who alone includes and emphasizes teaching in addition to baptizing and proclaiming. He wants to emphasize this as something distinct and yet something integral to the mission of the disciples.

We might ask why this is the case. Well, I think it has to do with Matthew's emphasis on discipleship, on creating followers of Jesus, mature believers, those who grow up into full discipleship. And so those who are being sent by Jesus are being sent not just to proclaim the gospel, but also to disciple the nations, to teach them.

And so Matthew emphasizes that one of the central thrusts of the sending of the apostles, one of the key elements of mission, is to make disciples not just converts, not just new believers, not just even followers in the simplest sense of the term, but full-orbed disciples, those who identify with Christ and those with whom Christ identifies. And so the disciples here are really being sent out to reduplicate themselves as that fellowship of discipleship around the risen Lord. And so the first question this evening that I want to ask is, do we really understand this command as integral to mission? When we think about mission, do we think about it as a command to teach in this way? We know that mission involves evangelism, yes, and we know that mission involves church planting, yes, and we know that mission involves healing and relief and development.

But according to our Lord, the mission of the church also includes this emphasis on teaching, and it's Matthew's gospel which brings this out so clearly by way of this command. But secondly, let's think for a moment about the character of this teaching. In Matthew's gospel, teaching is by no means a merely intellectual exercise.

You may have thought when I started out tonight down this road that I'm going to talk about teaching. The principal of a theological college, of course, has to talk about teaching in a certain way. But I want you to notice that in Matthew's gospel, and in fact in the New Testament, teaching is not merely an intellectual exercise.

The teaching of Jesus in the New Testament is primarily an appeal to his listeners' will, and not, in the first instance, an appeal to the intellect. It's a call for a concrete decision to follow Jesus. It's a call for a concrete decision to submit to God's will.

And it's one of the things that makes Jesus' teaching in the first century unique, and sets it apart from many of his contemporaries. Because the teaching of Jesus does not just involve the mere communication of information. It doesn't just involve learning the law.

It doesn't simply lead to some kind of a diploma or recognition at the end. It's not even primarily an appeal to action to do something, in the first instance. And you see, normally, when we hear that word teaching, that's what we think about.

That's how we think about education and about teaching. Education is about the communication of information. It's about applying what we learn.

We learn something theoretically, and then we apply it practically in life. But I want to suggest to you this evening that that, in fact, is a very modern and a very Western way of thinking about teaching and learning. Because in the New Testament, and in Matthew's Gospel, teaching, in the first instance, is about formation.

It is about being formed by Jesus Christ and by his Spirit, so that one's will and one's worldview are conformed to the reality of Jesus Christ, who invites us into his world, which is, in fact, the real world. We often think about having to take the Bible and take these truths and apply them to the real world. Well, I've got news for you.

According to Jesus and according to the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus is the real world, and his teaching invites us into that world, so that our will and our worldview are being transformed. It is about submission to the will of God as revealed in the ministry and teaching of Jesus. It is being mentored by him and being transformed by him.

You see, in the first instance, the teaching ministry of the Church is about connecting us to the person of Jesus. Disciples are formed in relationship to Christ himself, and disciples are formed in relationship to one another in a community of faith as they gather around the risen Lord. It's not simply about learning stuff.

I teach my son. My older son, Grant, has just been working his way through the Westminster Confession, Shorter Catechism, as we've been working through question by question as he was preparing to make a profession of faith, which, by the way, he did on Easter Sunday in the congregation that we worship in Pierrefont, on the West Island of Montreal, 12 years to the day of his baptism. He was baptized on Easter Sunday in 1989.

But we've been going through the Westminster Confession of Faith, Shorter Catechism, and I've been trying to impress upon him, as we've talked about the questions, that this is not just about learning this stuff so that you've got a truth tucked away in your mind, but it's about being connected to Jesus Christ. It's not about conforming to some ethical imperative. It's not even about learning a new set of skills, although all of those things may flow out of solid teaching.

But the first and fundamental thing is that it connects us to Christ, and without it, we are at loose ends. The late Archbishop of Canterbury, Donald Coggan, said this, The highest education is that which brings the student face to face, not simply with something great, but with someone great, for the Christian, namely, Jesus Christ. And that's why teaching and discipleship formation are so crucial to the Church today, because everything's at stake.

Men and women and young people and children cannot be connected to Christ and grow up into Christ and have Christ formed in their characters and in their lives in union with Christ apart from teaching, apart from what the Bible calls sound doctrine. You know, the word in the New Testament for doctrine is simply teaching. It's what the translation is.

The word doctrine simply means teaching. Instruction in the faith is instruction in Jesus Christ. And so the character of this teaching is to conform us in relationship with Jesus Christ, to the Christ who is our Savior and Lord.

Then thirdly, what is the content of this teaching in Matthew's Gospel? How does Jesus connect his disciples to himself through his teaching in Matthew's Gospel? Well, just think for a moment about what he does. Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Lord's Prayer. He teaches them the radical ethics of the New Community, the Sermon on the Mount.

He teaches them the upside-down values of the Kingdom of God, the Beatitudes. He teaches them to go out and preach and teach and heal and cast out demons two by two in Matthew 10. He teaches them the parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13.

He teaches them about the end of the age, about what is to come in Matthew 24. He teaches them to share bread and wine in his name in Matthew 26. And then he commands them to teach others to obey everything that he has commanded.

You see, the final command of Jesus to his disciples is to teach others the same obedience, to teach others the same things that he has taught them. We've now come full circle. The teaching of Jesus brings us into a relationship with Jesus, a relationship marked by radical obedience.

The obedience of faith, obedience to the will of God. There can be no obedience to the Great Commission, where there is no teaching. And we are not brought into this circle of faith.

Of course, in the Church today and in our culture, the word obedience scares us. We know how easily people can be manipulated and abused by others who lord authority over them. But the Bible portrays Jesus as a servant Lord who does not abuse or manipulate.

He invites us into fellowship and he demands obedience of us because he alone has the words of life. And so this brings us really to the crucial question, as those who would name the name of Jesus at the beginning of the 21st century, are we willing to be taught by Jesus? Are we willing to be taught by Jesus? Is the Church willing to be taught by its risen and ascended Lord? Do we want to be related to him? Do we want to obey everything that he commands us, not just what suits our purposes? Do we want to go and make disciples of the nations? Do we want to baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit? And do we want to teach others everything that Jesus has commanded? I know that all of you are not Presbyterian here tonight, but let me just speak to those of you who are for a minute and the rest of you can listen in. The Presbyterian Church in Canada used to be noted for its commitment to teaching the Scriptures and its commitment to missions.

And it seems to me that it's no accident that both of these emphases have declined in recent years. Because teaching is essential to the mission of the Church. According to Acts 2, 42-47, for example, the early Church gathered to hear the Apostles' teaching.

And what was the fruit of that? The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Teaching and mission are integral. And without teaching, there can be no discipleship.

Without discipleship, there is no mission. Without mission, there ultimately is no Church. It seems to me that one of the things that God is calling our Church to is the realization that educating and teaching disciples for mission may just be one of the ways forward for renewal within the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

But it's not just Presbyterians that have this problem, my friends. Let me talk to the wider group of you now. Because the Evangelical Church itself is also in danger on this point.

A few months ago, I was invited to speak to a group of Christian leaders on the island of Montreal. And they invited me to speak on the topic, An Uneducated Church, An Oxymoron? Now, I hope all of you know what an oxymoron is. An oxymoron is a self-contradictory statement.

That is something by definition which is self-contradictory. A friend of mine has been collecting oxymorons over the years. He has a long list of them, including such things as postal service, military intelligence, Presbyterian spirituality, Fellowship Baptist.

In Quebec, of course, we have one that's called Sovereignty Association. Well, uneducated church, uneducated church is an oxymoron. For by definition, where there is no teaching, there can ultimately be no church.

And of course, one of the things that's happening in a lot of Evangelical churches today is that they've given up on teaching. We have churches in which sermonettes, as someone has said, are creating Christianettes, but not the obedience of discipleship in mission. But let me also speak to myself tonight, because it seems to me that those of us who are in leadership in Bible colleges and theological seminaries must somehow also recover this vision.

If women and men and young people and children are going to be educated as disciples for mission in the world, they must be led by pastors and teachers who have this kind of vision. And the question is, where will such leaders come from? And that's one of the reasons why I've gone back into the theological college. One of the courses that I teach at Presbyterian College in Montreal is a course called Mission, Church and Context.

And the purpose of the course is to help students think about congregational ministry as mission. And in fact, the text that we use is a text by the African missionary theologian David Bosch, on whom your pastor, Dr. Livingston, wrote his doctoral dissertation. It's called Transforming Mission.

And we use that book as the baseline text because educating pastors today means educating them for mission. The Church in Canada today lives in a new missionary moment in a post-Christendom culture and context, and it's precisely at such a moment and in such a context that we need leaders who can lead churches forward in mission but also in teaching. For they go together, discipleship formation and teaching.

And so the Great Commission is a great mission text. But I want you to see tonight perhaps in a way that you've never quite seen before, that this is also a great teaching text. And that the two go together.

The risen Lord has commissioned us to make disciples, to baptize and to teach. And he invites us to share in his mission in the world. But that invitation, of course, first is an invitation into a relationship with himself, to be taught by him, to be one of his disciples, and to be sent out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit.

That's the task and the calling that I have as principal of Presbyterian College. And that's your task here at Knox Church Toronto. Will you pray for us as we pray for you? Because together the challenge is to educate disciples for mission, to obey Jesus together for the sake of his kingdom and for the glory of his name.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you this evening for this glorious text, this wonderful missionary text. And thank you for this congregation and other churches who have had over the years a commitment to

mission.

Help us also to recover and see how clear and important it is to have a vision for teaching as integral to mission. Pour out your spirit, we pray, upon us. Make us faithful in our discipleship and in our mission in the world.

For the sake of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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