

The What and the Why

Readings: Jer. 1:4-10; 20:7-9 and 1 Cor. 9:15-18

The What:

Zara and I joined New Creation Ministry in 1986, the year we moved to our present home, in order to serve the church more widely than we did in parish work. This is not a prescription for anyone else, and I have always made sure that any invitation came from the pastors or elders of churches in which I have preached.

Much to my surprise and delight, that has meant that I have been able to teach in some fourteen Bible Colleges and also to preach and teach in a wide range of countries: Australia, England, Scotland, Canada, Myanmar, Kenya, Liberia, Russia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Israel, Philippines, The Gambia, Solomon Islands, China and South Sudan. For health reasons I had to cancel my planned trip to Myanmar for next May, though I have now been given the 'all clear' for future trips. Zara has also served in Australia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal and Mongolia.

I want to stress that almost all of these opportunities were totally self-funded (meaning not funded by the recipients), though not without occasional gifts in support. It has always been my policy never to ask for money. Many of the invitations have been to serve where people are very poor, where pastors are subsistence farmers and often where the Christians are a persecuted minority. Again, I am not saying that my policy should apply to others, but it is the way the Lord has led me and Zara. For us, the gospel is not for sale: 'Freely you have received, freely give' (Matt. 10:8).

The Why:

In 1792 William Carey confronted the church with the startling argument that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) applies to the whole church throughout all history. He concluded: 'Christ's mandate remains in effect and requires the obedience of Christian men and women'. And of course, he ushered in what has been known since as 'The Modern Missionary Movement'.

But was he correct? Is mission only about obeying the Great Commission, or is there more? And is it obedience which is needed or was the early church simply on fire. Paul's words in 1 Cor. 9 applied to his own ministry, but surprisingly, in the New Testament the churches are nowhere commanded to obey the Great Commission; in fact, Matt 28:18-20 is not mentioned outside Matthew's gospel.

As a matter of more interest, The so-called commissions in Mark, Luke John and Acts are not commands at all. They are simple statements of fact. Mark's ending in 16:19, which looks like a strange copy of Matthew's ending and was added much later anyway, and is only added because older version of the Bible were translated from much more recent manuscripts.

In Luke 24:44-49, all we have is Jesus saying what will happen. The only command there is to stay in the city until they are clothed with power from on high. The same applies to John 20:20-23. There Jesus says that the disciples were being sent as the Father has sent him, presumably as sons. His ministry was that of love for the Father (John 14:31). But there is still no command. Then there is Acts 1:6-8. Again, in spite of many sermons to the contrary, this is not a command, it is a statement of fact.

Matthew's record was that Jesus was speaking explicitly to the eleven disciples (they are not even 'apostles' at that point). And I suggest that they did exactly what they were told to do. They were given a gospel to preach - and preach it

they did, and with great eagerness! What is more, though they all died, that gospel which Jesus gave them was written down in what we call the New Testament. And the power from on high which was poured on them has been poured out on all who receive Jesus – authority to participate in the great work of Christ in this world (Gal. 3:2; 3:26 (Paul wrote ‘sons’ not ‘children’). And ‘faith comes by hearing and hearing comes through the word of Christ’ (Rom. 10:17). He is the one who, with his robe dipped in blood, strikes down the nations with the sharp sword that comes from his mouth, the word of the gospel which he has placed in our mouths (Rev. 19:13-15). So it is no wonder that when the church in Jerusalem was scattered because of persecution, ‘they went from place to place and proclaimed the word’ (Acts 8:4; 4:20). The word not what you read (that is ‘the Word written’), it is what you hear as Christ personally address us, calls us, liberates us and transforms us.

We are not all apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, but are together the living proof of Jesus’ victory over sin, death and the devil. Over the years our gifts may no longer be what once they were or our opportunities for ministries of the past may have diminished. That much is God’s business. Some of us may need to learn that:

*‘Who best Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best.
His state Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o’er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.’* (John Milton, *On His Blindness*)

Jeremiah as a closing illustration: Jeremiah was young and was fearful but whatever he saw as impediments to service were not of any significance in the hands of God.

‘Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, ‘I have put my words in your mouth’’ (Jer. 1:9).

But, however hard it was to be what God called him to be, he had that deep transforming compulsion to speak.

If I say, ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,’
Then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jer. 20:9)

Mission is not cold, legal obedience; it is the overflow of hearts which are too full of Christ to contain it.

In words from worship of times past:

My heart is full with Christ and longs
Its glorious matter to proclaim!
Of Him I make my loftier songs,
I cannot from His praise forbear;
My ready tongue makes haste to sing
The glories of my heavenly King.

Happy, if with my latest breath
I might but gasp His name;
Preach Him to all, and cry in death:
Behold, behold the Lamb!

Ian Pennicook 22nd March 2019