

X Marks The Spot

*³Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.
(Jude 1:3. ESV)*

¹⁷I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. (Romans 16:17. ESV)

¹But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. (Titus 2:1. ESV)

Word And Deed

March 3rd, 2013

Matthew 28:18-20

Mark 16:15-16

Acts 6:1-7

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Introduction:

Good morning! We are at week 9 of a 14 week series called “X-Marks The Spot” in which we are exploring some of the real and seeming tensions we discovered in our Walk Through The Bible journey in 2012. This morning I want to talk to you about the tension that needs to be maintained between word and deed in the Christian life and ministry. I mentioned last week that some of these tensions are really complicated – like the tension between the Sovereignty of God and human responsibility – that is wildly complex and requires very careful study in order to maintain an orthodox perspective. On the other hand some of these tensions are not really complex in theory they are just hard to maintain in practice. So it is here. The Bible is actually remarkably clear and straight forward on this issue, but for whatever reason, getting this one right and keeping it right seems to be the battle in every Christian generation. So lets see if we can’t hammer some stakes into the ground so as to maintain in our fellowship a right understanding of the relationship between WORD and DEED ministry.

Open your Bibles to Matthew 28:18-20. My intention this morning is to begin our time by walking you through the three versions of the Great Commission in the Gospels and to exegete them carefully in order to see if we can’t identify what our priority is supposed to be as a believing community.

The Great Commission:

We'll start with Matthew:

¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (ESV)

In English it sounds like the primary command in this passage is to "Go!", but actually there is only one command in this paragraph and it is not the word "Go" it is the phrase "make disciples". In Greek the imperative mood for verbs is used to indicate what the command is in a sentence, in English we rely on word order and tone of voice but Greek is far more specific. In this paragraph there is just one command: Make disciples. Everything else modifies that one command. The other main words are participles – meaning that they modify the main verb. So literally Jesus is saying: You must make disciples and in doing so you will need to GO, BAPTIZE and TEACH. Go, baptize and teach amplify the command to make disciples.

Let's notice a few things about this Scriptural teaching. First of all let's notice that Jesus said that we should make disciples by going not inviting. That's a bit of a rebuke to the whole seeker church model isn't it? The pattern of the Bible is that Christians come together for corporate worship to be fed and edified and built up and then they GO out there into the big bad world where they work and go to school and have their homes and in their going they share the Gospel and hope to make disciples. We don't put on a giant show and invite people here for the professional people to share the Gospel. My job as a pastor is not to convert your friends. My job as a pastor is to teach you the word of God so that you can share the Gospel with your friends. We go. And we baptize. We call upon people to convert. Baptism in the Bible is the outward declaration of conversion. You are declaring that you have died to yourself and are raised unto Christ. A real church sees as its primary business to call people to DIE to themselves and to live for Christ. We are not in the self esteem business we are in the die to self and live to Christ business. And we are also in the teaching business. Teaching the Bible is not the opposite of evangelism – as if a church has to decide between being a hard core Bible teaching church or a church where people get saved – the Bible says the opposite, it says that teaching the Bible from

cover to cover is a big part of how people get saved and become disciples. The very word for “make disciples” in Greek is the word *matheteuo* and it is the word from we get ultimately get our word “mathematics” – it literally means to become a learner. Make learners, Jesus says. We are in the business of making learners who tremble at the Word of God. We are not in the “make deciders” business, we are in the “make life long learners who tremble at the Word of God” business. That’s what Matthew 28 says. Let’s look now at Mark 16:15-16.

The reason the different Gospel writers present slightly different wordings of these teachings is because they were summarizing. Jesus’ farewell discourse was probably 45 minutes long and they each wrote down 40 seconds worth of summary – that necessarily implies that they will select different words and phrases that they each felt best captured the substance of what Jesus wanted to say. That’s why the earliest Church fathers thought it wise to put four Gospels in your Bible instead of just one. Reading them together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit provides us with a full picture of what God wants us to know. This is how Mark records the Great Commission of Jesus to his church:

¹⁵And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. ¹⁶Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16. ESV)

Once again in this little paragraph there is only one imperative – one command. It is the command to “proclaim the Gospel”. Jesus literally says: “You(pl) must preach the Gospel”. That’s the command verb. Once again we have a participle which serves to amplify or expand upon the main verb; Mark only gives us one, the participle for “go”. So Mark records Jesus as saying: “You must preach the Gospel and you will do that as you are going”. This preaching the Gospel thing again, is going to involve getting out there into the big bad world and talking to people. Jesus goes on to say whoever is believing and who is baptized will be saved. By then flipping the statement into the negative and only mentioning the matter of “believing” suggests that Jesus is saying that being baptized is a subset of believing. A person is saved by believing and real belief will show up in public expression through baptism.

Let’s look now at Luke’s version of the Great Commission which is a little bit different. Look at Luke 24:45-49:

⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.” (ESV)

The command verb here is the Aorist Passive Infinitive of *kay-roos-so* which means “be preached”. Jesus is saying that “repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached”. Here in Luke we have an additional bit of clarity in terms of our identity – Jesus calls us something here, he calls us “his witnesses”. He uses the nominative – that tells us the identity of the people carrying out the main command. This passage tells us what we should do: preach the Gospel – and it tells us who we are – His witnesses. We are the people who in our preaching point to Jesus. That is the mission and the identity of a true Christian church. They are the people who preach the Gospel that points to Jesus.

Let’s summarize all of that then into one centralized exegesis. Here is what the Gospel writers seem to be telling us:

Our Imperative:

- 1a. Preach The Gospel**
- 1b. Make disciples**

By putting the three Gospel versions together it seems certain that Jesus said both of these things in a mutually interpreting kind of way. He probably said something like: “I command you to preach the Gospel and to make disciples.” The two commands are really a and b of one command. The mission of the church is to preach the Gospel and make disciples. Done

Amplification And Expansion:

In case the disciples were confused as to what this would look like Jesus gives them some helpful amplification. He says in essence, “You will do this by going out and calling on people to repent and receive forgiveness of sins. When they do that you will command them to give testimony through baptism and then after that you will need to teach them the whole counsel of God.”

Our Identity:

Jesus also tells us that we are WITNESSES to Him. That's important. We are not "kingdom builders" or "world changers" or "revolutionaries" or "soldiers of the cross" we are just witnesses. That is terribly liberating isn't it? You don't have to DO anything terribly fantastic or interesting you just have to point to Jesus. Jesus is the story, not you, not your willpower or superior intellect or remarkable growth – Jesus. We are not "building the kingdom of God one brick at a time" and we are not really "the hands and feet of Jesus" – that puts the emphasis on what we do – no, at the end of the day we are pointers. We point not to what we are doing FOR Jesus but rather we point to what he has done for us. We point to his hands and feet, not ours. We are witnesses.

Our Promise:

And with all of that Jesus provides us with a wonderful promise. The promise of POWER and PRESENCE as we do these things he has commanded. And lo I am with you always – the Greek connects the promise to the mandate. As you are preaching and making disciples and going and baptizing and teaching – as you are doing what I told you to do – I will be with you and you will know my power and my presence.

That's the great commission. We did all of that work in order to make it very clear that the priority for the church is clearly on proclamation. We are in the WORD MINISTRY business. We have a message about Jesus that we need to learn and trust in and be transformed by and to proclaim. That is our job. That's why the Apostle Paul could say:

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Corinthians 9:6. ESV)

He doesn't say: "Woe unto me if I do not dig wells in Africa!" He doesn't say: "Woe unto me if I do not help out at the Daily Bread Food Bank!" He doesn't say: "Woe unto me if I do not build toilets in the Sudan!" He says "woe unto me if I do not preach the Gospel!"

Why then do we dig wells in Africa, volunteer at the Daily Bread Food Bank and build toilets in the Sudan? Because of course we do – Christians lead the way by a country mile in all of those things and everybody knows it. When the Canadian government pulled the funding for

Crossroads ministries last month because of their views on traditional marriage there was actually a pretty impressive uproar from certain sections of the media – secular and some Jewish journalists warned the Canadian government that if you kick Christians out of the charitable business then the charitable business will collapse because the VAST majority of charitable work in this country and around the world is done by Christians. One Jewish journalist, who was very clear in stating that he was not a Christian, went so far as to warn the government that they should not expect the gay lobby to make up the charitable shortfall should they bow to pressure and begin to marginalize Christians. The homosexual community is not digging wells in Africa or toilets in the Sudan – but Christians are, he said. Why is it then, that we who are so clearly in the preaching the Gospel business are known even in the Christian hating secular media as wildly charitable people? Where does that come from?

Let's take a quick look at Acts 6:1-7:

Understanding Mercy Missions

¹**Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number**, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, **“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word** of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷**And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly** in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

In Acts 6:1-7 we see that when the disciples were increasing in number – when people were getting saved through the preaching of the word, when they were being baptized and taught all of the wonderful things in the Bible – they immediately starting caring for one another and feeding the poor and the needy in their midst. So much so that it became something of an administrative nightmare. The apostle had a choice to make, we can change how we use our time, which was spent in prayerful study of the Word and preaching of the Word, or we can come up with some management structures that will organize this project without distracting from the main work of the church. And that's what they did with the result that the church continued to grow. There are some pretty obvious principles we can pull out of that short story.

1. Mercy ministries are a logical consequence of true conversion

Mercy ministries simply **SPRING UP** among truly converted people. They are not themselves the mission of the church but wherever the mission of the church is successful they will spring up like fresh grass in the desert after a spring rain. They are a necessary and predictable fruit of true Gospel ministry. Jesus taught this all the time. He taught it positively in the Story of the Good Samaritan. Go and do thou likewise is the conclusion of that story. Jesus is saying that he is the Good Samaritan. He finds us dead on the side of the road and he picks us up, pours the oil of his own blood upon our wounds and puts us inside a healing community – the church – all at great expense to himself. He shows us mercy and then he says: “Go and do thou likewise”. People who have experienced mercy necessarily and predictably begin to overflow in mercy towards other people! Jesus taught this negatively also. Do you remember the story of the unmerciful servant? His master was merciful to him concerning a great debt and then he went out and was unmerciful to a fellow servant over a small debt. Jesus tells this negative story to show how unnatural and abhorrent it is for people who have been shown mercy to not react with overflowing mercy to others. It is wildly unnatural and potentially even proof that we are not truly saved. So, the first principle we meet in the Bible is that merciful ministry is the necessary, predictable and even characteristic fruit of truly converted people.

2. Mercy ministries must be managed such that they do not become a distraction to the primary ministry of the church.

The Apostles were pleased that their converts were so busy ministering mercy to one another but they were also concerned lest it become a distraction to the main business of the church which they understood as preaching the Gospel. They didn't try and quell it, but they were wise in setting up structures to manage it. This is the passage from which the idea of “deacons” was born. The deaconate was created in the church to manage mercy ministries such that they were effectively and fairly carried out in a way that did not distract from the primary business of the church which is Gospel proclamation.

3. The Gospel grows, and the church with it, when the Word is faithfully preached

The church actually stops growing whenever the emphasis is on mercy ministries at the expense of preaching. The Bible tells us that and history tells us that. Right here in the text we see that the church was growing because the Gospel was being preached and then there was an adjustment required – a response to this growing and healthy but potentially distracting reality of the food ministry – but once the adjustment was wisely and prudentially made – the preaching resumed and so did the Gospel growth of the church. Make no mistake, if you take your foot off the preaching pedal, the growth stops. How could it not? The Bible says:

¹⁴But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” ¹⁶But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” ¹⁷So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (ESV)

Faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ. Not by drinking the water from the nice well we dug. Not from going to school at the nice community college we built. Not from receiving medical care at the lovely clinic we funded. Faith comes from hearing the Word of Christ. Historically when we have forgotten that we have paid a huge Gospel price. The birth of modern liberalism in the 20th century came about when people began advocating for a Social Gospel. They started saying things like: “Let’s preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary using words”. What they meant was that they did not intend to deny or delete the Gospel they just thought it would be more effective to put the emphasis on deeds of mercy. Let the good works speak for themselves, or so the theory went. That was the path chosen in Canada by the United Church back in the 1930’s when they were by far the biggest Evangelical Church in Canada. How’d that turn out by the way? They finished the 20th century as the fastest shrinking religious organization in North America. And, I think we can fairly say, that in all but a few cases, they have fully and entirely lost the Gospel. Whatever is ignored in one generation will be forgotten by the next and denied in the third. The church only grows when the Word of God is faithfully preached.

So mercy ministry is a logical and necessary consequence of Gospel ministry which must be carefully managed and must not be allowed to become a distraction, but there is still a bit more to this story that we need to look at. Open your Bibles quickly to Titus 2. We don’t have time to read the whole passage but Paul is giving instruction to a young pastor. He tells the pastor to preach sound doctrine but also to pastor people into good behaviour. Set them an example in good works he says so that, look at verse 10:

in everything **they may adorn the doctrine** of God our Savior. (Titus 2:10. ESV)

The Greek word translated as “adorn” is *kos-meh-o* from which we get our “cosmetics”. It means to beautify or to decorate. Paul is telling a young preacher that if you are going to preach the whole counsel of God, if you are going to be one of those truth telling, flame throwing, orthodoxy dudes, then you better organize your people into expressions of good works and mercy in order to commend yourselves and your message to a watching world. People are going to be naturally inclined to hate our message, but if they see our good works, they may say: “There must be something there that I don’t see. Maybe I should take a closer look”. Jesus said something like that didn’t he?

¹⁶Let your light so shine before men, **that they may see your good works** and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16. NKJV)

Mercy ministries are a necessary and characteristic overflow of truly converted people AND they are also a very wise and prudential way of introducing yourself to people naturally inclined to hostility towards the Gospel. They adorn the Gospel, they decorate and commend a message that might otherwise seem harsh and uninviting. This is the BIBLICAL mandate for mercy missions in the church.

Practising A Biblical And Prudential Balance:

I’d like to close this morning by providing a very practical and pointed application. I’m convinced that for us – for FBC and RCC – this issue is more than theological, it is also and ultimately missiological. What I mean by that is that if we don’t get this right, if we don’t practice a biblical and prudential balance with respect to our Word and Deed ministries – we will find ourselves in a missiological catastrophe. On the one hand if we do as the mainline church did in the 1920’s and 30’s and as certain branches of the emergent church seem so intent on doing now and we put the emphasis and priority on mercy ministries over and above preaching – if we succumb to the galactically stupid plan of “preaching the Gospel at all times and if necessary using words” – if we do that we will lose the Gospel and we will forfeit our usefulness to Almighty God. God doesn’t bless editors. Jesus didn’t send us out to dig wells or free child prostitutes or teach literacy or dig toilets. That is simply not what he said. He said preach the

Gospel and make disciples and if we do that if we preach the Gospel and make learners who learn about Jesus and everything written in this glorious book then those people will dig wells and they will free child prostitutes and they will teach literacy and they will dig toilets. But if we go out to do that – if we go out to do those things as our mission and mandate - within one generation we will lose all understanding of why we should do that and we will forfeit all power to actually do that. Because only people who have known God’s mercy in Jesus Christ can go and do thou likewise. That is the Divine Order of Operations and we are supposed to be good *math-ay-tes* and good MATH-ay-tes – good learners good mathers – understand that if you neglect the order of operations you destroy the equation and alter the intended outcome! Don’t do it! Don’t mess with the divinely given order of operations. Trust in the Word of God to do the Work of God.

But of course we can also mess this up on the other side. We can preach the whole truth, and nothing but the truth and we can become a nasty and unresponsive and unlovely people. Let’s never do that. We can’t afford to do that. My friends the world has changed. The gap between cultural consensus and Biblical teaching has widened since grandma and grandpas day. In grandma’s day cultural norms and Biblical doctrines were pretty much within spitting distance of each other. That just isn’t so anymore. And so if we want to stay here, in Bible land, and teach the same Gospel that our grandparents taught then we will need to adorn this Gospel with many deeds of mercy. We will be confronting a much higher degree of natural scepticism and even overt hostility. We can cave and compromise – as many Evangelical churches are doing – or we can seriously up the ante on deeds of mercy. Not to the point where it becomes a distraction – but intentionally, authentically, passionately and VISIBLY. If we do that, by God’s grace we may extend a window of Gospel opportunity in a rapidly closing culture.

This is the knife edge that we must walk. This is the tension that may define our generation. Many will abandon the Gospel and hope that deeds of mercy win them favour. We will not. We will preach the Word of God in season and OUT OF SEASON, without apology and without compromise and full of faith that the Word of God will continue to do the Work of God until the Return of God. But many who do so will retreat into their bunkers and hide in their holy holes and wait for the rapture while the world goes to hell in a hand basket. We will not. We will do good to all, we will show mercy as we have been shown mercy, we will seek the good of the city and we will let our light so shine before men that they will see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.