The Great Commission

There are not too many passages in the Bible that cause me more inner conflict than this one. There are also not very many passages in the Bible that are responsible for more widespread yet completely opposite results – immensely good and stunningly horrific.

This is Jesus commissioning his disciples to be missionaries. Even before Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers were to be missionaries. As part of his ministry, he sent the disciples out on a mission to cast out demons and heal the sick.

Here, Jesus is commissioning them to continue that work, with an emphasis on teaching and making disciples. And it was meant for future generations of disciple missionaries as well.

Missionaries throughout the centuries have done some great things. They've built schools and hospitals. They've taught health practices and agricultural practices to improve the lives of people in developing countries.

They've shared the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection in far flung lands and translated the Bible into hundreds of local languages. Missionaries have led to an explosive growth in the church in the global south, especially Africa.

But Christians, thinking they're following the great commission, are also responsible for some awful things. Things like colonization – the belief that people in other countries needed to not only be converted to Christianity but also made as European as possible. Much of Africa, Asia, and South America were colonized by European Christians who believed the native culture was inferior.

The Holy Roman Empire was responsible for the Crusades and the Inquisition which led to the deaths of countless Muslims and Jews, as well as those they deemed to be Christian heretics.

In our own country, native children were stolen from their families, baptized, and sent to so called Indian schools to have the Indian in them erased.

As I was researching some things for today's message, I learned about the term "western mission guilt complex." It's basically guilt that much of western Christianity holds onto about the horrible mistakes the church and Christian missionaries have made and the harm it has done to cultures globally.

In a podcast from one of my seminary's professors, Dr. Shifferdecker recounted a trip she took some students on to Tanzania. Tanzania is one of the places in the world where the church is growing by leaps and bounds. The American students wanted to know why.

It turns out it's because African Christians have totally taken the great commission to heart. Evangelism is taken very seriously. It is that evangelism of Africans by Africans that has led to the tremendous growth in the church all over sub-Saharan Africa.

A leader in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania told the group – it's time western Christians get over the guilt complex. Our timidness about evangelism – about actually taking this commission seriously – is hurting the church in the western world.

I do think there's more to it than that here. I think there are Christians still making essentially the same mistakes many western missionaries did. They're just doing it here instead of overseas. It happens when they insist that to be Christian means to be a part of a particular ideology or culture or political party.

We are also up against pretty massive skepticism, not just toward the church, but toward this whole hard to believe Jesus story.

So, having said all that, let's see if we can still reclaim this great commission from its conflicted past. It is after all something Jesus wants his disciples to do.

Matthew has made some masterful connections between this final passage in his book and his overall account.

First of all is this idea of worship and doubt. Throughout their time with Jesus, the disciples have been a mixed bag. Sometimes they get it and their convictions about Jesus are strong. Other times they are described as faithless. You'd think the resurrection would have solved the issue of doubt.

But remember, Matthew is writing for his congregation who are at least a couple generations beyond the resurrection. He knows that worship and doubt will always be held together in tension in Jesus' followers. The further we get from the actual event, the truer that gets.

We do not have to pretend we don't have doubts to fulfill Jesus' great commission. In fact, maybe in our skeptical post-everything world, we can actually be better evangelists if we don't come from a place of certitude. Too many Christians have pushed beliefs on others. Maybe a better approach is to simply acknowledge that we don't have it all figured out.

Maybe first, we simply be willing to listen. To hear about someone else's beliefs without the need to argue. To listen and acknowledge the pain of someone who's been hurt by the church. Sometimes, in the context where people know you are Christian, just simply loving them without asking them to change is the best evangelism.

When we do speak, maybe we say something like this – I know this Jesus story is kind of crazy and I don't get all of it. But somehow, I am really drawn to Jesus and I sense his presence and guidance in my life. I can't explain it all, but he gives me hope.

Verse 18 can help us as well. Jesus said all authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. If you remember back in the beginning, Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The devil said, all authority has been given to me.

But the devil was lying. And you can tell because the things the devil promised Jesus were earthly food, worldly power, and glory for himself.

Jesus' authority looks different. Jesus' authority comes from God, and it comes through a cross. When the church becomes an instrument of earthly power – when the church works on behalf of empires and kings and conquerors, we get things like the crusades, colonization, the abduction and forcible conversion of Indian children, and all sorts of evil done in the name of the church.

If what the church is doing doesn't look like what Jesus taught – you know, that whole love your neighbor and take up a cross thing - the church is wrong and its evangelists are taking their orders from Satan. Let me say that again… If what the church is doing doesn't look like what Jesus taught, the church is wrong and its evangelists are taking their orders from Satan.

So, with those warnings, let's look at the rest of it. First, what's the goal of this great commission?

It's to make disciples of all nations. The nations connect back to the Magi at the beginning of Matthew's account – those exotic visitors from the east who were the first to acknowledge the birth of this messiah.

He truly would be good news for all nations and all cultures. Jesus couldn't cover all that territory in his earthly life. He would let the rest of the world be covered by his missionaries – the ones standing on the mountain with him all the way to us.

Yes, we are missionaries. Go isn't about traveling the world as a missionary – the emphasis is on making disciples wherever we go in life.

Our goal is not necessarily to get more church members per se. Church members who occupy a pew for an hour on Sunday morning but don't live out what they hear aren't really disciples. And our goal is certainly not to get people to heaven. Whatever we might think about what that means, it's something only God can do.

Our goal is to make disciples. And just what exactly is a disciple? I would define a disciple as someone who is so captivated by Jesus and his teachings that they want to be a part of his movement.

And when they want to be a part of the Jesus movement, they want to learn all that he taught…and even more they want to live what he taught. And then they can't wait to tell others all about it.

This passage and the whole topic of evangelism tends to make us squirm. We can all list reasons why it's hard…maybe even why it won't work. I find it difficult to make disciples even in the church sometimes.

The passage and the whole book ends with "and remember I am with you always to the end of the age." That has been true from the very beginning, when the angel told Joseph that Jesus would be Emmanuel, God with us. And it will be true forever.

We don't do this work alone. And we aren't responsible for the outcome. We're just asked to share the hope that we've been given, and to teach by words and by example what Jesus taught. And then we just trust the power of the good news that Christ died and rose for the sake of the whole creation to bring about the world God intends.