
Y O U N G A D U L T S W E E K O F P R A Y E R : D A Y F I V E

THE GREATER COMMISSION

When German forces occupied Hungary in March of 1944, the Holocaust machine went into overdrive. The genocide was swift, claiming 600,000 lives. More than 450,000 Hungarian Jews were deported to the Auschwitz death camp in the seven weeks between May and July, the fastest rate of deportation of the Holocaust. Most were sent to the gas chambers on arrival. One-third of Auschwitz's Jewish victims were Hungarians.

In the midst of this madness, Laszlo Michnay's reputation grew. Hungarian Jews believed the president of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hungary was nothing short of saintly. At extraordinary risk to his life and his family, he fed, hid, and saved numerous Jews in his home and church during this time of extreme persecution.

Pastor Michnay's determination to help the Jews was sealed when, during his attendance at church conferences in Germany in 1936 and Poland in 1941, he witnessed the anti-Semitism and atrocities beginning to become evident in those nations. Surmising it was only a matter of time before the Nazis steamrolled into Hungary, he prepared for the impending local holocaust: with the aid of church donations and an inheritance, he stockpiled non-perishable food and planned a network of safe houses.

In the early 1940s, Pastor Michnay implored his congregation to help the oppressed Jews. People walked out of the church because they were sure he was going to be arrested. They were afraid, but he was never harmed. However, the Hungarian Seventh-day Adventist churches ultimately were closed as the German SS heard about and focused on Pastor Michnay's seditious sermons.

Near the end of World War II, an order was issued from the local German headquarters that they were going to execute every member of the Michnay family the next day because they were hiding Jews. But that night the Germans, in the misguided belief the Russian army was dangerously close, left the street. In the subsequent chaos, the family escaped their fate. This was just one of many times the family was miraculously saved.

The church basement was filled with Jewish people who

were provided with mattresses and blankets. Some were falsely taken in as relatives. Pastor Michnay turned no one away. Everyone—including the family—ate one meal a day, usually a bowl of soup.

The number of people the Michnay family hid fluctuated according to available space and the danger in Budapest. He sent many to the countryside to safe houses belonging to a network of Seventh-day Adventist ministers who were never detected.

Acting a sermon

Some 60 years after these events, this story of Pastor Michnay was printed in an Australian national newspaper, coinciding with an exhibition at the Sydney Jewish Museum that included his story as someone who had migrated to Australia in later life. While his sermons may have been remembered for their effect, the content is less remembered. But his greatest sermons are those actions that demonstrated God's

concern for the persecuted and the oppressed, the hungry and the homeless, putting himself on the line to serve and save.

It's a kind of "preaching" that deserves greater attention and practice. The verses known as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) are among the best known in the Bible—by Christians. They have been often described as the "Christian's mission statement" and have been emphasized, analyzed, and prioritized to explain all kinds of mission and evangelistic projects; mostly these focus on going, making, baptizing, and teaching—a formulation that has been picked apart and put together in various ways.

But sometimes we detach or skip the opening and closing statements of this commission: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. . . . And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'" (Matthew 28:18, 20b). This commission begins and ends

with Jesus. His personality, power, and presence are the context in which His disciples are to accept and fulfil His mission. As such, we need to remember that these instructions to Jesus' first disciples were not so much a new assignment but more a continuation of the mission Jesus had already been working among them.

The mission of Jesus

Whether it was the prescribed reading for the day or Jesus intentionally found the relevant verses (Isaiah 61:1, 2) in the scroll He was given to read, it was no coincidence these verses were the text for His first public sermon: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18, 19). Neither is it a

coincidence that the story of Jesus' short sermon—"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21)—begins Luke's record of Jesus' public ministry.

Jesus—and Luke in his retelling of Jesus' story—used the prophecy of Isaiah to explain what Jesus was doing and was about to do. These verses from Isaiah 61 were adopted as Jesus' mission statement. His ministry and mission were to be both spiritual and practical, and He would demonstrate that the spiritual and practical are not as far apart as we sometimes assume. For Jesus and His disciples, caring for people physically and practically was at least part of caring for them spiritually.

Sometime later, Jesus' cousin and forerunner, John, sent messengers to Jesus to ask the key question: "Are you the One?" While John may have had mixed motives for the questions, perhaps even hoping to prompt Jesus to action on his behalf—he got the question right.

Yet Jesus' response might be different than what we expect—except that it echoes what we have already seen, what Jesus said He had come to do: "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Luke 7:22). For Jesus, it seems His practical ministry—care for those in need and practical love in action—should have been enough to convince or at least remind John that Jesus was the One whom John had previously declared Him to be.

The first commission

In Matthew's story of the commissioning of the disciples, when Jesus finalized the group of twelve special followers it seems the first thing He did was to send them out. He gave them an assignment with specific instructions: "As you go, proclaim this message: The

kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 10:7). This was the good news He wanted them to practice sharing—in this first instance, working only in their local communities. So when He left them with His final instructions to go and evangelize, to be His witnesses, to share good news (see Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8), it was not a new undertaking but rather a broader field for the mission they had already been learning and doing.

About 2,000 years later, we find ourselves as part of the same story and the same mission. Jesus also instructs us to share the good news. But the key to evangelism—and how we do evangelism—is considering what it is that we are to share.

Obviously, the good news is a message. We tell of how God created our world and that, after it went wrong, He has worked—and is still working—through history toward recreating it. We tell of how we were hopeless but that something changed in our lives when we somehow

connected with the reality of God, and we now live by different motivations and priorities. We tell of how Jesus came to announce that “the Kingdom of Heaven has come near” and how we live in anticipation of that kingdom being made complete when He returns.

One of the ways to do this is to realize that the good news is also an action. Jesus’ further instructions to His disciples were to “heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give” (Matthew 10:8). These instructions repeat Jesus’ mission statement in Luke 4:18, 19. This good news was to make a real difference in the lives of the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, and the hopeless. And, if it doesn’t, can it really be considered good news?

Not only is this a vital component of the good news taught and practiced by Jesus, it is also key to its effectiveness and attractiveness: “The world cannot argue with a

church that lives in the pain of society’s poor. The integrity of this form of Christianity silences the harshest of critics, because they know genuine love and compassion when they see it” (Tony Campolo and Gordon Aeschliman, *Everybody Wants to Change the World*, page 13).

As the disciples went from town to town, announcing the kingdom of heaven and healing the sick, helping the poor and giving of themselves, it is easy to imagine that the obvious question they would be asked in each community they visited is why they were doing these things and who had sent them. In answer, they would have enthusiastically told the people about their Teacher and Friend—a man called Jesus—and begun to explain to them the little they understood about who He was and the difference He had made in their lives.

Ultimately, the good news is a Person. Jesus selected His disciples “that they might be with him and that he might

send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14), and that friendship and commission became the foundation of any and all evangelism they were to do. They came to recognize in Jesus a life-changing Godness and a world-embracing love—and they couldn’t stop talking about it (see 1 John 1:1-3).

When we spend time getting to know Jesus, we begin to discover a Friend and a friendship we would be telling others about even if Jesus had not specifically instructed us to do so. The good news is about Jesus. Indeed, the good news is Jesus. And that’s why it’s worth sharing and living out.

Therefore, go . . .

As a result of their mission, training, service trips, and personal experiences with Jesus, His followers were instructed, “therefore 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 teaching them to obey everything I have

commanded you” (Matthew 28:19, 20). Their ministry in His name was to reflect and enact the values and principles of Jesus’ ministry and the kingdom He invited them to. They were to join with Jesus in His mission to lift up the last, the least, and the lost.

Church discussions sometimes seem to get stuck on the apparent need to choose between a focus on service or witnessing, justice or evangelism. But when we better understand each of these concepts and observe the ministry of Jesus, the difference breaks down and we realize that kingdom action—particularly serving others—is a form of proclamation and leads naturally to an invitation. Pastor Michnay preached his most enduring sermons in the lives he saved and what it cost him and his family to protect others. Perhaps our opportunities to serve might not be so dramatic or life-threatening, but we don’t choose one action or another. Rather, we work with God in working with people, meeting their real needs using

whatever resources God has entrusted us with.

In one of Ellen White’s best-known statements, she explained it like this: “Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me.’ . . . The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counselled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice” (The Ministry of Healing, page 143).

As we have seen, these two kingdom actions—service and evangelism—were closely entwined in Jesus’ first commission to His disciples, and that is how His later and greater commission should be similarly understood and lived out. At its best, evangelism—bringing the good news

of hope, rescue, repentance, transformation, and God's all-embracing love—is an act of service. And, rightly understood, service is evangelism, proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God in ways people cannot help but notice in our lives—and theirs.

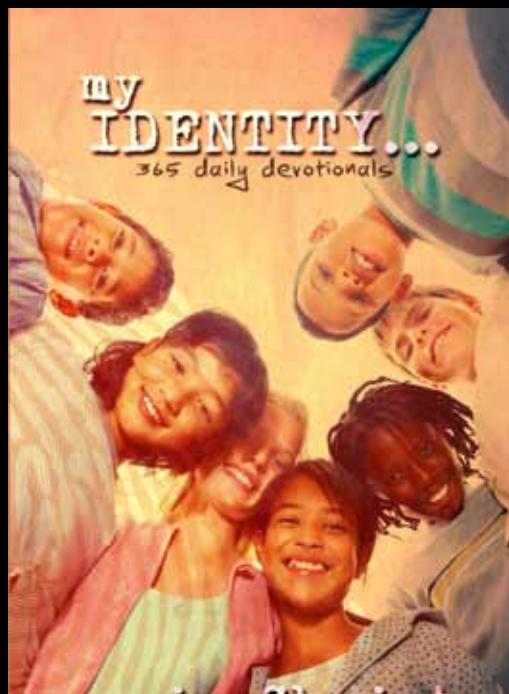
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Read Luke 4:16–21. Is this how you would respond to similar questions about the divinity, messiah-ship, and mission of Jesus?**
- 2. Why do you think we sometimes have the tendency to separate service and evangelism as alternative Christian activities?**
- 3. As Jesus described it, the good news was to make a difference in the lives of the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, and the hopeless. If the Gospel doesn't have these positive and practical results, can it really be considered good news? Why or why not?**

identity

a devotional for youth and youth leaders

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