

The Great Commission Inside the Church:

What Can Our Beginnings Teach Us For Our Future?

By Kathleen Beagles, PhD

Most parents try to train their children well. They want to see them grow up well-informed, well-balanced, and good citizens. Imagine how God feels about His children. A system of religious education existed in the Old Testament. Jesus Himself started the training process in the Christian church with His disciples. And He left us with a Great Commission to train God's children as they become adopted into His family and continue to grow.

The verbs we associate with Christ's Great Commission are *go*, *preach*, *baptize*, and *teach*. Mark 16:15-18 (KJV) gives a version of the Great Commission that uses the word *preach* [Greek: *kerusso*], which implies being a public crier of the truth. Matthew 28:18-20 uses the words *teach* [*matheteuo*] and *teaching* [*didasko*], which indicate that we are to make ongoing students, to disciple, and to share information.

Does the New Testament outline pedagogical methodology for this important teaching? Perhaps not overtly. However, the very use of the word *matheteuo* as opposed to the verb *matheo* (which is not used in the New Testament) indicates that the teaching/learning being described in the Great Commission is one in which the learner does not only take in information, but becomes attached to the teacher and his/her conduct of life. The very verb choice here speaks volumes about potential methodologies as well as teacher qualifications.

The Adventist church has a program in place for *going*. Our missionary program is unparalleled and is continually being fine-tuned. We also have a program for *preaching* and *baptizing*: ministerial training at many levels, a worldwide satellite program, Internet preaching/evangelism; and all of this is faithfully followed up by *baptizing*, often called *reaping*. Unfortunately we seem much more intentional about publicly crying the truth (preaching) than we do in making disciples and ongoing students (teaching).

So, what exactly has God commissioned us to do?

Seventh-day Adventists have done very well at the commissioned tasks of *going*, *preaching*, and *baptizing*. We also have an inspired and continually growing *teaching* system in our church schools. These are laudable attempts at fulfilling the commission. But as our church grows, we are experiencing a growing disconnect between the two functions. Our international church membership (God's growing family) is rapidly outgrowing any hope of having access, physically or financially, to our church school system.

It is obvious that *teaching* in the Great Commission refers not only to denominationally run formal education, but to training people to be well-informed, maturing disciples of Christ and fully functioning Adventist Church members. There is a function of *teaching* that must come not only before, but after *baptizing*, and that is not exclusively the function of our church schools. Otherwise, might not many run the risk of spiritual malnourishment even while being involved in weekly praise and worship, similar to the situation during the Dark Ages?

Some of this *teaching* comes to the local church members through the “foolishness of preaching” (I Cor 1:21). But to a church organization that has so much light on the principles of education, we cannot see *preaching* alone as the complete fulfillment of the commission to *teach*. Without a set curriculum for our pastors to follow from the pulpit, preaching does not fill the need for intentional, comprehensive teaching.

Some *teaching* comes to the local church members through the avenue of Sabbath school. However, the subject matter of the adult Bible study guides used in Sabbath school is not decided in a manner that would suggest that it is meant to be an overarching curriculum for the teaching fulfillment of the Great Commission. In fact, the need for ongoing religious education in the church is so little felt that Sabbath school, in many venues, appears to be dying.

What *is* our system for teaching believers in the local church? Don't God's children need training in such things as how to share their faith; how to function as family-unit witnesses to a splintered world; Christian principles of personal money and possession management; how to involve children and young people in a personal engagement with God and their church; and even facilitating intentional practices that foster the fully reconciled and transformed Christian life?

Imagine if we added an intentional religious education component to the organizational structure we already use—something transcending the preaching/baptizing ministry and formal Christian education—and planned our fulfillment of the Great Commission from such a paradigm. How much more effective we would be in providing the needed training to our ever-growing church membership.

And, imagine as well, that this education was based on *matheteuo*, discipleship, being in relationship with a teacher, and not simply *matheo*, learning without any attachment. **The methodology**, then, could come straight from Deuteronomy 6:5-9. Those qualified to teach would be those who loved the Lord their God with all their hearts and souls, who had let Him write His law in their hearts, and who were then willing to “teach diligently” the rest of God's children as they all went about their daily lives.

The learning objective of this diligent teaching would be for the students (God's children) “to attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God,

to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fulness of Christ” (Eph 4:13, NASB).

Such intentional discipleship training not only would inform, but also transform God’s children. It would prepare them for full citizenship in His kingdom and keep them part of a viable, growing, and united church until He comes to take them home.

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