

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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A MISSION FROM GOD

Matthew 28:16-20

Do you remember “*The Blues Brothers*”? John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd created the characters for a skit on “*Saturday Night Live*” in the late 1970s. In 1980 they made a movie called “*The Blues Brothers*” which tells the story of how Jake Blues, just released from prison, and his brother Elwood decide to take on a “mission from God” and resurrect their old blues band in order to raise \$5,000 to save the Roman Catholic orphanage where the brothers grew up. The famous tagline from the movie is: “They’ll never get caught. They’re on a mission from God!”

The word “mission,” as Peter Barnes points out, conveys the idea of an individual or a group of persons sent to perform a particular service or to carry out a designated task. Think, for example of a diplomatic mission undertaken to ease tensions between nations or governments. Or think of a military mission to liberate a people or to take control of a strategic area. In the movie “*Saving Private Ryan*,” Captain John Miller and his unit of Army Rangers were given a very specific mission to find and “save” Private James Ryan, whose brothers had been killed in action in World War II, so that at least one of Mrs. Ryan’s sons would survive the war and return home safely. Or, again, think of a humanitarian mission to alleviate suffering, or to aid the poor, the hungry, or the homeless.

For the church, the word “mission” carries with it a spiritual purpose and a holy calling – a calling from God Himself. We have been given a mission from God to carry out the work of God in this world, to serve the purposes of God in this generation (cf Acts 13:36). Like the Blues Brothers, we believe that we in the church – in our life and work and witness together – are on a mission from God. In recent years there has been a new (or renewed) emphasis among church leaders on the missional nature and calling of the church in the world.

Today I want to begin to lay out for you seven marks or seven characteristics of a missional church – a church that understands it is on a mission from God. These seven marks are not original with me. I didn’t come up with them. They were identified and articulated by the Long Range Planning Committee of the EPC in its report to the General Assembly of our denomination in Colorado last month. We will look at the first three marks today, and then look at the remaining four three weeks from today.

Mark #1: A missional church is a church that is grounded in the Scriptures and historic Christian orthodoxy and so is committed to the primacy of the Great Commission.

We affirm this principle in our mission statement here at Faith when we say that in every aspect of our church’s mission – in our worship, fellowship, discipleship, evangelism and

service – it is all to be done “according to God’s authoritative Word.” We take the Bible as the foundation for our life and work and witness together, and we unhesitatingly affirm it to be the inspired, unerring and authoritative Word of God, the final and only infallible rule for faith and life

In the “*Essentials of Our Faith*” in the EPC, we acknowledge and affirm the primacy of the Great Commission and its claim on our lives. Essential #7 says:

The Lord Jesus Christ commands all believers to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and to make disciples of all nations. Obedience to the Great Commission requires total commitment to “Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.” He calls us to a life of self-denying love and service. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

A commitment to the primacy of the Great Commission, then, is part of our DNA. It is an integral part of who we are, not only as a congregation of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church but as individual followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we neglect this Great Commission, we prove to be untrue to who we are, and we fail to carry out the mission God has given us.

The most familiar expression of what we call “the Great Commission” is found in our text for today from Matthew 28. Other versions of the Great Commission are found in the other Gospels – Mark, Luke and John – and in the Book of Acts as well. But the most familiar version is found here in Matthew 28. Listen again to the words of the Lord Jesus Himself (beginning in verse 18):

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (28:18-20).

Notice three things very briefly about this commission. First, it speaks of the authority of Jesus. Authority, as Warren Wiersbe says, is the right to use or exercise power. Power and authority are not the same thing. You can have power without the moral or legal right to use it. You can have power without having the authority to exercise it. Jesus had not just power but authority as well. In fact, God the Father had bestowed on Him “all authority in heaven and on earth.” All authority was given to Jesus – authority over life and death, the authority to forgive sins, and the authority to rule as King and Lord over everything, including my life and yours.

So then, because all authority belongs to Jesus, He has the right to direct and commission His disciples – including you and me – to go and make disciples in His name. This leads us to the second thing, which is the commission itself. The Christian faith is a missionary

faith. The commission to go and make disciples is not optional. If we are to be faithful and obedient to God and His calling in our lives, we dare not neglect this commission or leave it to a small, select group of believers. The Great Commission is our commission. It belongs to all of us. It belongs to the whole church. If we don't carry it out, or if we expect others to do it for us, then the Great Commission becomes "the great omission" in our lives.

As you may know, in the Greek, there is only one command given in the Great Commission. That is the command to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19). The word "go" is not a command in verse 19. It is actually a participle, and literally it means "going." What Jesus is saying, I think, is this: "In your going, as you go, wherever you are and wherever in my sovereign plan I call you to go, make disciples of all nations."

Discipleship – that is, making disciples who are fully devoted to the Lord Jesus, continually growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus and living in grateful obedience under His sovereign and gracious rule – is at the heart of the church's mission. The church is in the business of making disciples. It is one of the main reasons why we are here. You and I are called to discipleship in our own lives. But we are called to be disciples who are making disciples of others.

Making disciples isn't just my job as a pastor. It is not just Pastor Bob's job, or Justin's job as our Youth Director. It is not the job of the paid professionals alone while church members sit on the sidelines and watch or maybe cheer us on. No. It is the mission and calling of the whole church and of every follower of Christ. It is my job, your job and our job together.

The Great Commission is not simply about getting people to pray "the sinner's prayer" or to become members of the church. It is about introducing people to the Lord Jesus Christ, inviting them to respond to His saving work in faith, and guiding them into a lifelong, growing relationship of discipleship with the true and living God who loved this world so much that He gave His only Son to die for it, so that whoever believes in Him might not perish in our sins but have eternal life (John 3:16). The Great Commission is about cultivating the mind and heart and character of Jesus in people so that they (and we) will become fully devoted to Him and live lives that bring glory, honor and praise to Him. And so that more and more people everywhere – people in all nations – will know and love and serve and worship God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength. That is what the Great Commission is about.

The third thing I want you to see in the Great Commission is the promise of Christ's presence with us. In verse 20 Jesus says: "Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." We have the promise of Christ's presence as we carry out the commission He has given us. But the presence of Christ is not just a promise to hold onto. It is a fact. It is a reality. Jesus doesn't merely say: "I will be with you." He says: "I am with you. I am with you always."

On our own, in our own power, you and I and all of us together are not up to the task we've been given in the Great Commission. If we trust in our own power or charisma or strategies or techniques to carry out our commission, we are bound to fail. We can only do it in the power of Jesus. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord (Zechariah 4:6). The presence of the Lord Jesus with us – with you, with me, with all of us together – and His power at work in us (Ephesians 3:20) enable us, flawed, imperfect vessels that we are, to carry out our commission.

As you seek to serve the Lord where He has placed you, never forget the words of Jesus: "I am with you always." It is not just a promise. It is a fact.

A missional church – a church that knows and understands it is on a mission from God – is grounded in the Scriptures and historic Christian orthodoxy and so is committed to the primacy of the Great Commission. May it be true of us here at Faith.

Mark #2: A missional church is a church that believes the United States has become post-Christian and is now a mission field.

I have to admit, I don't like the sounds of that. But I'm afraid it is true. We can debate and disagree about the extent to which America was a Christian nation at particular times in our past, but I think it is clear that the U.S. today is a post-Christian nation. We remain a remarkably religious people, but the Christian or Judeo-Christian consensus that once existed in American culture no longer exists. Our culture has changed dramatically in the last 60 years since the end of World War II, and especially since the advent of the 1960s.

Sydney Ahlstrom, in his monumental book *A Religious History of the American People*, first published in the early 1970s, says that the terms "post-Puritan" and "post-Protestant" were first popularly applied to America in the 1960s. He argues that a fundamental shift in American moral and spiritual attitudes occurred during the decade of the 1960s. The legacy of the '60s is still being played out in American culture today, as we become an increasingly "post-Christian" nation in our values, beliefs, and public life.

The consequence of this seismic cultural shift for the church is that the church's position and status in American life have changed. No longer is the church at the center of American cultural life. It has been pushed to the sidelines. The church now finds itself on the edges and its cultural influence has diminished significantly.

I don't like it, but that is the reality. As a result, instead of being called simply to send missionaries to other peoples and nations and cultures, the church in America today is called to be a missionary people right here. Because America itself is a mission field. Washington, D.C. is a mission field. Northern Virginia is a mission field. Fairfax County is a mission field. Kingstowne is a mission field.

There may have been a time when we could assume that almost all our neighbors and classmates and co-workers had a basic understanding of the gospel and had been exposed

to Christian teachings about God and the world. But that time is past. It is gone. Our culture has become post-Christian, and America is now a mission field.

Mark #3: A missional church is a church that believes it has been planted by God in its own community to effectively reach those around them with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the 1950s an influential Christian leader in the city of Pittsburgh named Sam Shoemaker articulated an inspiring vision for the city. Shoemaker's dream was "to make Pittsburgh as famous for God as it is for steel." Those of you who have been part of Faith longer than I have likely remember Graham Smith's vision for this church as God led us from Key School to this new building 11 years ago. That Faith would be used by God to make Kingstowne "the King of Kings' Towne." That Jesus would be recognized and honored and served and exalted as the Lord and King of the Kingstowne community.

Isn't that a lofty vision? Isn't it a noble and inspiring vision? Lord, let it be so!

But you know it won't happen just by saying or repeating those words. It won't happen automatically just because we're here in Kingstowne. It won't happen simply by opening the doors of the church and waiting for Kingstowne to come to us. And it won't happen if our primary concern when we come to church is what we hope or expect or want to receive from church.

A missional church is a church that recognizes it is on a mission from God and understands that it has been planted by God in its community for a purpose: To glorify God by reaching its neighbors with the message of Christ's saving love and ministering to people's needs in His name.

That is where I'm going to stop today. We will return to this theme three weeks from today (after I return from vacation) and consider four more marks of a missional church.

Like the Blues Brothers, you and I and all of us together who bear Christ's name are on a mission from God. May we be found faithful to our calling as we carry out this "great commission."

Lord, let it be so. Amen.