

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. W. B. Quigley, "One Thousand Days of Reaping," *Ministry* (Feb., 1982), 8.

2. A good summary of both McGavran's life and missiological thought is found in the first four chapters of a Festschrift written in his honor — A. R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man, and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973). Much of the historical part of this essay can be documented there.

3. Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Mission* (New York: Friendship Press, 1955).

4. Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 31-33.

5. A. R. Tippett, "Portrait of a Missiologist by His Colleague," in *God, Man, and Church Growth*, p. 20ff.

6. Charles H. Kraft, "Towards a Christian Ethnotheology," in *God, Man, and Church Growth*, pp. 109-126.

7. Gottfried Oosterwal, *Mission: Possible* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1972), pp. 46, 47, 54, 55.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 48; see also p. 59ff.

# With All Deliberate Speed: A Study of Pace in Mission

by Bill Knott

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."*<sup>1</sup>

Few passages of Scripture are as central to the consciousness and mission of the Christian church as is Matthew 28:18-20. Within Christianity, there is indeed virtual unanimity in the belief that these few lines, often called "The Great Commission," constitute the authentic will of Jesus for His church. The thesis of this essay is that these lines — particularly the phrase translated "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" — have significant implications for the

task of the Adventist church in the world and for the pace at which that mission should proceed.

One of the dilemmas confronting the missionary church concerns what we might term the "temporal" dimension of Christ's commission to His disciples. All work in this world must be accomplished in a framework of time: the length of time allotted to a task inevitably shapes the character of the working and the form of the product produced. A major task demanded in a quarter-hour will probably be wrongly-paced and poorly done. A 15-minute job spread over half a day will invite shoddiness of work and a leisurely attitude on the part of the laborer. Similar points hold for Christian mission. This mission must proceed, not only from the divine word of command, but also at a divinely-appointed pace in keeping with the character of the task given by the Lord.

A brief survey of Christian thought about mission reveals at least two contrasting views of the relationship of mission to time, and

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from the earliest years of the church, both gained a following that could appeal with apparently equal validity to the words of Jesus. For want of better terminology, we will here call them the “eschatologically urgent” and the “educative” perspectives on the pace of mission. The discussion that follows is not meant to suggest that either perspective remained entirely outside the pale of the other’s influence — they did, after all, profess allegiance to a common, coming Lord — but to sketch the major features of their differences and the distinct implication of each for methodology in mission.

The position here labeled “eschatologically urgent” draws its authority from mis-

proclamation rather than its results.<sup>2</sup>

One important modern spokesman for this time-urgent view of mission is the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, faithfully delineates the lifestyle and task of those whom Christ calls to follow Him. His chapter on “The Work” contains a passage worth citing at some length. Commenting on the commission Jesus gives His disciples, Bonhoeffer writes:

As soon as they set foot in the house or city, they must come straight to the point. Time is precious, and multitudes are still waiting for the message of the gospel. . . . Their proclamation is clear and concise. They simply announce that the kingdom of God has drawn nigh, and summon men to repentance and faith. They come with the full authority of Jesus of Nazareth, they deliver a command and make an offer with the support of the highest credentials. And that is all. The whole message is staggering in its simplicity and clarity, and since the cause brooks no delay, there is no need for them to enter into any further discussion to clear the ground or to persuade their hearers. The King stands at the door, and he may come in at any moment. Will you bow down and humbly receive him, or do you want him to destroy you in his wrath? Those who have ears to hear have heard all there is to hear. They cannot detain the messengers any longer, for they must be off to the next city. If, however, men refuse to hear, they have lost their chance, the time of grace is passed, and they have pronounced their own doom. “Today if ye shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Heb. 4:7). That is evangelical preaching. Is this ruthless speed? Nothing could be more ruthless than to make men think there is still plenty of time to mend their ways. To tell men that the cause is urgent, and that the kingdom of God is at hand is the most charitable and merciful act we can perform, the most joyous news we can bring. The messenger cannot wait and repeat it to every man in his own language. God’s language is clear enough. It is not for the messenger to decide who will hear and who will not, for only God

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sionary instruction to the disciples recorded in Matthew 10:1-15, Mark 6:7-13, and Luke 9:1-6. In all three synoptic versions these instructions, apparently given in conjunction with the choice of the 12 disciples, require, among other things, an urgency that compels the disciples to shake quickly from their feet the dust of any town that will not receive them.

From this commission, and augmented by an intense longing for the personal advent of their Lord, many have deduced a methodology of mission that insists on the clarity of the call to repentance, the intensity of the personal witness to Jesus Christ, and the mobility of the messenger. There can be no status quo in a mission environment radicalized by the urgent Christ, whose words ever ring in true disciples’ ears — “Go ye, Go ye.” Stress is laid upon the fact of

knows who is “worthy”; and those who are worthy will hear the Word when the disciple proclaims it. . . . To refuse to believe in the gospel is the worst sin imaginable, and if that happens the messengers can do nothing but leave the place.<sup>3</sup>

Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the pace of Christian mission will seem attractive to any church weary of decades of seeing the gospel encumbered with ever-changing social and political goals. His view of the gospel message as capable of ready communication and immediate reception by its hearers will seem attractive, too, to those weary of the excesses of Christian theologizing and philosophizing. And there is, indeed, an appeal in Bonhoeffer’s vision of mission that no one fully awake to the needs of the church can deny.

But this vision, however appealing, must still be measured against the standard of the commission given by the resurrected Christ to the band of His disciples. And in light of this commission the point at which Bonhoeffer’s view may be faulted is this: it fails to pay sufficient attention to that phrase of the Great Commission which reads, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”

**I**n saying that mission involves making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them, Christ was also giving, if only indirectly, an indication of the pace at which mission should proceed. Baptizing a disciple requires only minutes, but teaching that disciple to observe all things commanded by the Lord — that is, to practice them — implies a significant amount of time. We are confronted here, in fact, with a vision of mission that will greatly slow the time-urgent mission already discussed.

Bonhoeffer is amply serious about Christ’s command to go forth and labor. Still the passage quoted seems open to the charge of being less concerned with the salvation of others than with the accomplishment of the task of proclamation. The relationship between the missionary and the hearers implied in the passage appears to be primarily a speaker-audience relationship, rather than the relationship of a witness to neighbors

whom he loves.

To Bonhoeffer’s rhetorical question, “Is this ruthless speed?” I am inclined to answer “yes,” particularly in light of the patiently educative manner in which the Lord of all mission went about preparing His disciples for their task. As Gottfried Oosterwal has so cogently summarized it, “Jesus called His disciples as representatives of all Israel, trained them, instructed them, and then sent them out — but not immediately — in all directions unto the remotest ends of the earth.”<sup>4</sup>

Some who emphasize eschatological urgency may fear making the investment of time required by an emphasis on the continuing growth of the disciple. But such an attitude implies that “going” is more important than “teaching,” that covering territory is of greater importance than the flowering of the gospel in a given locale. But what grounds are there for such an attitude?

If we stress *teaching* as a vital part of the Gospel Commission, we discover a pace for mission well suited to a serious belief in the importance of Christ’s ethic in the modern world. If we stress *going* to the detriment of stress on teaching, we may find ourselves in the ashamed position of the runner Ahimaaz, who could only testify to having witnessed a great and puzzling tumult. The gospel deserves better than this.

Teaching all men to observe what Christ has commanded requires a pace for mission which proceeds at the rate of individual character growth, of personal assimilation of truth into the life of the believer. Christ’s commandments to His disciples require both a change of behavior and a change of attitude, which can be achieved only over the passage of time.

When, for example, the missionary takes seriously the command of Jesus to teach the practice of love of enemies, he must, at the very least, qualify notions of eschatologically-urgent mission. What genuine love of the enemy can there be which does not proceed, at least in part, from the modeling of Christ-like love seen in the daily life of the missionary?

If prayer is to become for the convert something more than the substitution of the

Lord's Prayer for his previous magical incantation, it will owe largely to his having seen the positive results of a continuing prayer-consciousness in the example of the missionary.

In a similar manner, the Christian's proper relation to material things will only become credible to the person who has seen, in the experience of the missionary, the joyous freedom that accompanies total dependence on the benevolence of the Father.

All these lessons demand the investment of significant time and the continuing presence of the teacher-missionary with the learners. They back up, in other words, the claim that the Great Commission requires an educative pace for mission endeavor.

A further implication of Christ's directive to teach the observance of His commandments is the necessity of the missionary's being present long enough to verify that a given group of converts has grasped the life-changing message he has delivered and is well along the road to Christian community. The missionary who leaves a string of unevaluated groups of converts in his wake may be satisfying a personal desire, but he is leaving them to reap the whirlwind he has sown. Oosterwal observes:

The history of mission clearly shows that when the gospel spreads too rapidly — without a proper organization which guards the Biblical truth and which follows up its proclamation — distortions, falsehoods, and misinterpretations result. For this very reason God, at times, had to prevent His own followers from expanding into certain areas or from going too quickly.<sup>5</sup>

On the wider scale of denominational mission, this consciousness of a divinely-appointed pace for mission could place a check upon the increasing fascination with numerical growth that is evident in the

Adventist church today. While the writings of Donald MacGavran and other evangelicals are bringing this theme into greater prominence in scholarly circles in the church, there is a native Adventist triumphalism which seizes upon the "one thousand a day" passages in Ellen White's writings as a standard by which to measure the apparent missionary success of the church.

Yet alarming apostasy rates in mission areas where frenetic activity has recently been the norm testify again to the necessity of matching a mission pace to the missionary message. These disturbing figures must be seen as being as much the responsibility of the church's mission program as any special activity on the part of the devil to siphon off new converts. Only when we own the problem as well as the program that may have produced it will we be ready to consider a pace for missions more suited to the message we proclaim.

To adopt a more educative pace for mission does not, in any sense, require the Adventist church to abandon its eschatological vision. The kingdom is not prevented from coming because Christians take the necessary time to acquaint new converts with the claims Jesus makes on their lives. Indeed, it may be argued that the "quality" of Christian resulting from an educative pace in mission will be a far more valuable instrument in the Lord's hand for the proclamation of the gospel than will any number of eager but unstable enthusiasts fascinated by the prospect of imminent translation.

Neither does this pace for mission relegate the church to the position of being chiefly an agent for social and political change by reason of its greater involvement with the daily life of its members. While the gospel will have an impact on society, establishing more stable roots in community need not divert the church from its essentially spiritual mission.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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1. Matthew 28:18-20. Revised Standard Version.
2. Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 106.
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

(New York: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 233-234.

4. Gottfried Oosterwal, *Mission: Possible* (Nashville: Southern, 1972), p. 36.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 37.