

GO? AND MAKE DISCIPLES

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“Therefore, GO and make disciples of all nations...” Matt. 28:19

For most of my Christian life, I had thought that to satisfy the Great Commission, I had to GO overseas and be a missionary reaching people of other ethnicities in other lands. After living and working in the Middle East for five years, I came back to the U.S., planning to return to the Arab world for a lifetime of missionary service. However, soon after my return, I was asked to teach a Sunday school lesson from the book of Acts on the beginning of the world mission of the Church. That was eighteen years ago, and preparation for that lesson has profoundly impacted the direction of my life and subsequent ministry.

As I read through Acts, my previous understanding of missions in the early church began to change. I had always thought of Paul and Barnabas as being the first cross-cultural “missionaries.” However, according to Acts 2, “Jews from *every nation* under heaven” responded to the gospel preached to them by Peter and the apostles at Pentecost. These Jews were ethnically of other nations, but, according to the Greek translation of this text, were living permanently in Jerusalem as immigrants, much like we have in our cities and towns throughout North America. In order to understand the gospel properly, each person needed to hear it in his or her own language, as is evidenced by the fifteen or more languages listed in Acts 2.

I was next impacted by the story of Phillip's ministry to the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. This story deals with the conversion of a short-term international visitor to the land of Christ and the disciples. Phillip met him on the “the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza,” which was at that time Judea. Soon after, in Caesarea, a city in Samaria, Peter ministered the gospel to the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and his household.

I always assumed that Acts 1:8—“being witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and Samaria ...”—meant “being witnesses to people like me in my home city (my Jerusalem), people like me in my home state (my Judea), and people different from me who lived on the other side of the city or in another region of my country (my Samaria).” However, before Paul and Barnabas were sent out “to the ends of the earth,” the early disciples were witnesses to *the nations* in Jerusalem, to *an international* in Judea, and to *a foreigner* in Samaria.

God does not consider those who “go voluntarily” with the gospel to be His only desired means of cross-cultural ministry. A chart follows which shows how God has worked throughout history, not just through those who “go voluntarily,” but also through those who “come voluntarily,” those who “come involuntarily,” and those who “go involuntarily” with the gospel.

FOUR MECHANISMS OF MISSION HISTORY¹

	OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD	NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD	MODERN MISSIONS
GO VOLUNTARILY (with the gospel)	Abraham Hebrew Prophets	Phillip to Ethiopian Eunuch Peter to Cornelius Paul and Barnabas	William Carey Hudson Taylor Current Overseas Missionaries
GO INVOLUNTARILY (with the gospel)	Joseph Jonah Daniel & friends Esther	Persecuted Church in Acts	Military Business People Modern Day Persecuted Church
COME VOLUNTARILY (to the gospel)	Naaman the Syrian to Elisha Queen of Sheba to Solomon Ruth	Magi at Jesus' birth Greeks who seek out Jesus Cornelius sends for Paul	International Students & Visitors Immigrant Laborers & Businessmen
COME INVOLUNTARILY (to the gospel)	Gentiles Settled in Israel by Cyrus the Great (2 Kings 17)	Roman Military	Slaves Brought to America International Refugees

In the Old Testament, one of God's primary means of witnessing to the nations was to those who “voluntarily came” to Jerusalem and saw how God had blessed His people in the “land of milk and honey.” In Deuteronomy 10:17-19, God gave these instructions to his people through Moses: “The Lord your God is the God of Gods and the Lord of Lords.... He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for *the alien* by giving him food and clothing. *So show your love for the alien*, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Later in Deuteronomy 31:12, He instructs them further: “Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and *the alien* who is in your town, *in order that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God ...*”

King Solomon understood this heart desire of the Lord God when constructing the temple. In his dedicatory prayer in I Kings 8:41-43, Solomon prays:

¹ from *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement Study Guide*, Steven C. Hawthorne, Institute of International Studies, 1999, p. 49

As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel, but has come from a distant land because of Your name ... when he comes and prays toward this temple, then hear from heaven, Your dwelling place, and do whatever the foreigner asks of You, so that all the peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You ...

In the New Testament, Jesus was distressed that the Court of the Gentiles in the temple had been taken over for personal gain. His passion was so great that he cleared the temple, saying, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations?'" In addition, one reason God sent His beloved chosen people into exile in the Old Testament was because they were not obedient to this heart desire of God. As a consequence, Daniel, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah and other Old Testament heroes became missionaries who "involuntarily went" as representatives of the living and true God of Israel to the leaders of the greatest nations of that time.

Today, we too have trouble understanding that God desires for us to be not only a light to our own nation, but also to the nations around us. The largest international student population today is from India, of which most are Hindu. Unfortunately, statistics report that 70% of international students are never asked to have dinner with an American family. Many Muslims I meet in my city have never been invited into a Christian home for coffee, tea, and discussion about our Savior. Missionaries I know who have returned from Latin America to serve among the massive Hispanic population in the U.S. oftentimes report losing as much as 70% of their support because they are not "missionaries" anymore. We willingly support missionaries to reach Hindus, Muslims and Hispanics overseas with our finances and our prayers. There are also many great opportunities for reaching out to every nation right here in our own neighborhoods.

Our God is a never-changing God! He continues to want missionaries to "go"! However, those of us who stay have a biblical mandate and many examples showing His desire for us, not to sit passively on the sidelines, but to reach out with the love of Christ to those who have come to our land either voluntarily or involuntarily! May He be glorified in our obedience to His revealed will!

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