



ARTICLE REVIEW

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BRIDGING THE GAPS BETWEEN MISSION, EVANGELISM AND ECUMENISM.

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The article, *Bridging the Gaps between Mission, Evangelism, and Ecumenism*, is authored by Hope S. Antone, a Protestant religious educator, and an executive secretary for Faith, Mission and Unity of the Christian Conference of Asia. Summarily, the article tries to explain why different churches would seem to regard mission, evangelism, and ecumenism to be opposing with one another. Conversely, it begs the question, why unity in different Christian denominations remains elusive. Towards the end, she wants to know how Christian churches would build communities of peace with all those who adhere to the Christian faith. Her answer to these concerns is to return to the original context and purpose of the three concepts mentioned above.

Initially, Antone examined the words mission, evangelism and ecumenism, in their simple dictionary definition (common perception), and then later on discussed them in their biblical context.

In the dictionary definition of the words (mission, evangelism and ecumenism), she argues that they are much interrelated and not in conflict with each other. For instance, *dictionary.com* defines the word mission (in a church-related manner), as a body of persons sent to a foreign land by a religious organization to spread its creed or provide educational, medical, and other assistance. This is not really far from, according to Antone, the way the church understands the word mission, which emanates from God, a *Missio Dei*. The same dictionary further defines evangelism, as a zealous preaching and dissemination of the gospel through missionary work. Lastly, ecumenism generally means the movement towards Christian unity, that is, to enable the whole church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world.

After discussing the aforementioned words in their common parlance, Antone revisited the biblical bases of mission, evangelism and ecumenism. She began by reexamining the text in Mt. 28:16-20, viz.,

THE GREAT COMMISSION

(16) Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. (17) And when they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. (18) And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (19) 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, (20) teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always to the close of the age."(RSV)

The author followed Preman Niles' work reflected in the book, *From East and West: Rethinking Christian Mission*. Niles argues that the meaning of the phrase "authority entrusted by God in heaven and on





earth” needs to be seen in view of the one “doing the will of God”. The command to “go and make disciples” means to bring everyone under the rule of the compassionate One. The phrase “teach them to obey all that I have commanded” should be viewed, accordingly, in Jesus’ role as the New Moses, but who is greater. This commandment “to the disciples” was to welcome non-Jews into the community of the Messiah, and “nations” meant people in whose midst they lived but whom they had considered “other” to them. Thus, the commission, accordingly, was given to the Jewish community who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah and whose mission was to be a genuine community of the Messiah- that is, a welcoming, compassionate community, focused on doing the will of God. Through their lives as witnesses, they become faithful missionaries to the people in whose midst they lived.

Antone then revisited the different Gospel accounts where the theology of the Great Commission text is further expounded. She treated Lk.24:47 and Acts 1:8 as gospel accounts where God’s will and reign are at work in human history, where Jesus’ ministry is portrayed as crossing borders – from Galilee to Jerusalem to Samaria to Rome. It is open to non-Jewish people (e.g. Cornelius). Thus, mission includes being open to the promptings of the Spirit, being “converted” by the other in mutual sharing. In Jn. 20:20-30, it depicts a missionary God who sent Jesus, who in turn sends his disciples. The parallelism of the Father-Son and Christ-Disciples, and the role of the Holy Spirit as Advocate assures the continuation of the work, that is, to love one another and that they may all be one. Mission is therefore presupposes peace-building.

Now, the account of Mark 16:15 stresses the role of the suffering servant. For Antone, Jesus is portrayed as Messiah of the ordinary people. The values and characteristics of ordinary men are shown as the alternative values that truly exhibit the reign of God. Compassion, which also includes solidarity and identification, means breaking the lines of untouchability and boundary in order to create a community. For Antone, those who suffer the most have the capacity to care the most. Thus the words of the evangelist “Go and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” means for ordinary people is to carry out the good news of God’s compassion to all.

After which, Antone revisited the biblical bases of evangelism and ecumenism. She argues that these two words are not opposed to each other although, at first glance, they seem to be such.

Evangelism (*euangelion*) can be traced back to the Gospel of John 10:10. In that passage, the “good news” of Jesus Christ is not only about dying on the cross for our sins, but also the testament of his life that demonstrate God’s will. Likewise, Ecumenism, at its root meaning, means the “whole inhabited world as God’s household”. Unlike now, ecumenism is defined as the movement towards Christian unity. However, there is that fear unity might mean a loss of identity. The author asserts that in John 17:21, unity does not mean a loss of identity. As between Father and Son, the relationship of sustaining love (on the part of the Father) and complete obedience (on the part of the Son), identity is preserved despite their unity. Antone then cited Genesis 1:1-31 to point out the plurality of God’s design, and interprets it in the context of unity through interdependence and interconnectedness, equality of gender, and partnership of humankind with all of creation.





In between the biblical contextualization of mission, evangelism, and ecumenism, Antone also touches their historical development. She affirmed the ecumenical agenda by pointing out four major shifts to broaden it – from competition to cooperation of denominations, from condemnation to dialogue with other faiths, from isolation to collaboration with civil society, and from disintegration to integrity of creation. She concludes by invoking her readers the need to retrieve the radical essence of the good news in evangelism, and embrace the broader and more original meaning of ecumenism.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In this critical analysis, the treatment of the text Mt. 28:16-20 will be given attention.¹ Firstly, the Matthean text (The Great Commission) needs to be seen in the light of the whole of Matthew's theology. This is possible by looking at the proximate context and remote context of a specific passage. Kenton Sparks argues that the typology of Matthew 28:16-20 is primarily Mosaic.² He said that if we consider the character of Jesus as the new Moses, a striking parallelism between the stories of this two "heroes" emerges. For example, just as Pharaoh killed the Israelite children, so Herod killed the Jewish children; just as Moses was saved from Pharaoh by placing him in the Nile, so was Jesus saved from Herod by taking him to Egypt; just as Moses departed from Egypt as the savior of Israel, so Jesus departed from Egypt as the savior of the world, and many more. Nevertheless, Matthew's Jesus is presented as someone who is greater than Moses. This is attested in his account of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7). Here, Jesus taught a different spirit towards one's enemies, yet an elucidating statement in Mt. 5:17 shows Jesus admonishing his followers not to see him and his teaching departing from the faith of Moses. This shows that the Matthean Great Commission of Jesus should always be seen in the Mosaic backdraft. A historical setting is apropos in dealing with this.

HISTORICAL SETTING OF THE MATTHEAN GOSPEL³

First, the communities (in Matthew) seem to have been composed mainly of Christians who had been converted from Judaism. It is believed that they have a good knowledge of the scripture since the gospel made reference to the Old Testament 130 times. For them the Law remains the rule of life. They are very familiar with the way rabbis interpret scriptures and, most strikingly, some of their questions are typically Jewish. The reason why Jesus was presented as the New Moses thus becomes evident. Likewise, an overarching redactional structuring of the evangelist's gospel mimicking the five books of the Pentateuch shows again the Mosaic typology. However, when we put our attention to "the mountain" in the Great Commission, Matthew's Jesus has indeed becomes Moses' superior, the giver of a new law. Moreover, when we regard the mountain in Matthew 28:16-20 as parallel to the mountain where Moses died (mountain in Moab) before he could lead his people into the Promised Land, Matthew's Jesus as the New Moses, becomes greater than the Moses of the Old Testament since Jesus, who resurrected from death, promised his disciples: "I am with you".

¹ As she revealed at the onset that she is following the work of Preman Niles, however, as I am not in privy of the aforementioned work, this critical review is only on the article of Hope Antone.

² Kenton L. Sparks, "Gospel as Conquest: Mosaic Typology in Matthew 28:16-20," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006) 651-663.

³ Etienne Charpentier, *How to Read the New Testament* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1997), 69.



Thus far, Antone's contextualization of Jesus as the New Moses in the Matthean texts still shows consistency with what Sparks said. However, Antone's take on the words "...make disciples of all nations" is different from Sparks'. Antone interprets this as pertaining to the Gentiles (non-Jews) or in today's context those of other faiths and denomination. Sparks, on the contrary, would understand the phrase "all nations" in what he calls "fulfillment by antithesis" exegesis. This for Sparks is Matthew's way of showing that evangelizing the nations is the appropriate fulfillment of the older Mosaic charge – which is actually to kill the Gentiles. Employing historical-critical method, Sparks looks back in some communities of Jewish antiquity, where the ethnic boundary that separated Jews from Gentile was dense. This is aptly illustrated by the sentiments expressed in 2 Esdras 6:55-56 (cf. Isa. 40:15; Jub. 24:27-33; 1 Enoch 90:19): "All this I have spoken before you, Lord, because you have said that it was for us that you have created the world. As for the other nations that have descended from Adam, you have said that they are nothing and that they are like spittle". Yet again, as Sparks' reading of the whole Gospel accounts of Matthew, ethnic inclusiveness and nonviolence is very much present in its totality. However, this depends more heavily on the redactor's perspective than on traditions about Jesus' life.⁴ Second, these communities are in conflict with official Judaism that was reborn at Jamnia. With the capturing of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., some Pharisees re-assembled before the final downfall at Jamnia. As the Sadducees and Essenes disappeared in the troubles, Judaism became Pharisaic. With this new identity, however, it had to defend itself in two fronts. Internally, it had to settle the divisions between Jews. A liturgical calendar was established, and synagogue worship was unified. Above all, a "canon of scripture" was established. Externally, since Judaism was confronted with Christianity that was well-rooted in Palestine, measures were taken at Jamnia to prohibit Christians from taking part in Jewish prayer. As a matter of fact, a petition was introduced into the Jewish prayer called the Eighteen Benedictions against "heretics, apostates and the proud", that is, Christians. Thus, Christianity becomes a Jewish sect rejected by Judaism.

Third, these communities are open to Gentiles. As they rediscovered the command of Jesus – sending them out all over the world, the missionary Christian conviction was evident in the first years of the Church.

From the three aforementioned characteristics of the early Christian communities, one can deduce how the movement of these communities made their mission and evangelization.

COMMENTARY ON MT. 28:16-20⁵

The appearance of the risen Jesus on the mountain in Galilee is a very important scene in the overall plan of Matthew's gospel. The mountain (Mt. 5:1; 17:1) and Galilee (Mt. 4:12-16) are preeminent places of revelation. The disciples' doubts (v.17) may involve the possibility of having such an experience at all or the propriety of worshipping Jesus. In either case, their doubts vanish quickly. They, like the women mentioned in verse 9, worship Jesus (Mt. 2:1-12).

⁴ Sparks, 651-663.

⁵ Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 113-4.



The so-called great commission of verses 18b-20 explicitly expresses Jesus' authority (v. 18b), the command to make disciples (vv. 19-20a), and the promise of Christ's abiding presence until the fullness of God's kingdom comes (v. 20b). These summarize the three major themes of Matthew's gospel:

- 1) Supreme and universal authority has been given to Jesus by his heavenly Father. We can infer then that he far surpasses every other human being and deserves all the exalted titles given to him.
- 2) The disciples are to share their discipleship with all people (not simply towards their fellow Jews) and to pass on Jesus' teaching to them. The largely Jewish community for which Matthew wrote his gospel probably needed some encouragement to share their faith with non-Jews, and the statement in verse 19a was most likely understood as a reference to the Gentile mission. The wording of the command to baptize (v. 19b) undoubtedly reflects a baptismal formula used in the Matthean community.
- 3) The promise of Jesus' continuing presence with the disciples and their successors brings to fulfillment the name "Emmanuel" (God is with us) given to Jesus at conception (Mt. 1:23) which is in accordance with Isa. 7:14. The promise assumes "a time of the church" between the inauguration of God's kingdom through Jesus and its fullness at the end of the world. The spirit of the risen Jesus will guide and protect the church during this time.

Again, the Gentile mission explicated in the second major theme in the gospel of Matthew shows the consistency of the movement of the early Christian community's mission of evangelization.

STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT⁶

The passage can be divided into two sections. Verses 16-17 provide the introduction to the statement of Jesus in verses 18-20. The introduction provides the setting for the characters (eleven disciples, Jesus), their location (mountain, Galilee), event (commissioning of Jesus), and situation (disciples were in worship; some disciples are in doubt). Verses 18-20 can also be seen in two units. The authority proclaimed by Jesus (v. 18) provides the basis for both the commission (v. 19-20a), and the promise of everlasting presence in verse 20b.

In verses 19-20a, the commission is expressed by a main verb – "make disciples", with the participle "go" (subordinated by "make disciples"). And instrumental participles (identified by scholars): "baptizing" and "teaching", describing the manner how discipleship is to be made. The commands in Mt. 28:19-20a is followed by the declaration of promise by the risen Christ to the disciples (v. 20b) as they carry out the mission. The knowledge that the risen Christ will be with the disciples gives them the encouragement to fulfill what is commanded of them.

EXEGESIS OF THE TEXT "MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS" IN Mt. 28:19⁷

What does "Make disciples"? What does the phrase "All nations" mean? The noun "disciple" (*mathetes*) is very common in Matthew and in the New Testament. However, the related verb "to make disciples" (*matheteuein*) is very rare. Only four times did it occur, three of which are in Matthew (13: 52; 27:57; 28:19). "Making disciples" in active form is found only in Mt. 28:19 and Acts 14:21. The deponent

form, on the other hand, Mt. 13: 52, "therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of

⁶ Herman Hendrickx, *A Key to the Gospel of Matthew* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1992), 1-3.

⁷ Hendrickx, 26-28.





heaven...” and Mt. 27:57, “... a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus (literally: who also himself was discipled to Jesus).” Behind the peculiarity of the New Testament use, an insight that one can become a disciple of Jesus only on the basis of a call leads to a discipleship possibly stands.

For Matthew, the command of the Risen Christ to “make disciples of all nations” means that Church is a COMMUNITY OF DISCIPLES MAKING DISCIPLES. This is further emphasized in Mt.18 (the community discourse speaking in terms of brotherhood) and in Mt. 24: 45-51 (speaking of servants in charge of fellow servants). With this, the Church is considered a community of people who are equal before God and among themselves. It should not be mistaken, however, that Matthew undermines the role of authority in the Church. More than in the Gospel of Mark, the role of Peter and the Twelve was emphasized (while, however, repeatedly warning against ambition and abuse of power). But compared to the basic given of equality, all distinctions of rank and authority are to be considered secondary. The disciples are sent to make all nations members of the people of the Son of Man, the Church, by first *baptizing them*, and thus breaking through the limitations of affiliation to the ancient people of God (based on ethnic belonging, circumcision, etc.), and even of the earthly ministry of Jesus which was confined to “the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt. 10:6; 8:5-13; 15:24).⁸

Concerning “All Nations”, there is a dispute among scholars whether this phrase would mean “Gentiles and Jews” or whether it refers to the Gentiles only. If it refers only to the Gentiles, the phrase would express a universalism without a special consideration for the position of Israel, which in this case, had already ceased to be a factor as it was destroyed in 70 A.D.

For those who took the first stance (Gentiles and Jews), they argued that a truly universalistic measurement transpires in seven mission accounts in the Old Testament namely, Gen. 12:1-4; 17:1-14; 17:15-22; 26:1-6; 28:10-22; Jer. 1:1-10; Is. 49:1-6. Accordingly, “all nations” should be interpreted as including both Gentiles and Jews.

For the supporters of the second stance, upon observing the attitude of Matthew towards Israel, they concluded that Matthew’s universalism does not include Israel. Furthermore, Matthew’s universalism is contrasted with Israel, which has betrayed God, therefore losing their functionality and role among the nations. Thus, the clause “Go and make disciples of all nations” would mean “Go and make disciples of all the Gentiles”. However, the occurrences of *ethne/ ethnos* in Matthew, as has been pointed out, can be divided into three types:

1. Instances where the word refers clearly only to Gentiles (as in Mt. 4:15; 6:32; 10:5,18; 12:18; 20:19)
2. Instances where it is not clear whether the word refers only to Gentiles (Mt. 20:25; 24:9)
3. Instances where it is highly probable or clear that the word does not refer only to Gentiles (Mt.21:43; 24:7, 14; 25:31)

Basing from what has been mentioned, it is very well possible that *panta ta ethne* in Mt. 28:19 means “all the people”, which is including Israel. That although Matthew sees the privilege of Israel is something of

⁸ Herman Hendrickx, *From One Jesus, to Four Gospels* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997), 84.





the past (Mt. 21:43), they still remain a present reality for Matthew's church (Mt. 28:15). Likewise, they do qualify in Matthew's vocabulary as an *ethnos* (Mt.24:7). Thus, Israel falls under the commandment of the risen Christ to make disciples of *panta ta ethne* (Meier).

Lastly, with regards, to the literary form of Mt. 28: 16-20, there was a debate between scholars whether Matthew composed this as an enthronement hymn based on Dan. 7: 13-14. However, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of the Matthean composition by its structural relationship to the whole Gospel than by a putative allusion to one or more Old Testament passages or forms.⁹ From here, we have shown the diachronic (historico-critical approach) and synchronic (literary and structural approach) ways of understanding exegetically Matthew 28:16-20, particularly in its concept of mission and evangelization.

CONCLUSION

Hope Antone's employment of Matthew 28:16-20 as a biblical basis to resolve the contradicting understanding of mission, evangelism and ecumenism, is apt exegetically. She likewise gave emphasis on how to carry out the mission of evangelization in foreign culture and nation through the inclusivist and mutualist models.¹⁰ These, she claims, were supported by Lk.24:47 and Acts 1:8 as gospel accounts where Jesus' ministry is portrayed as crossing borders – Galilee to Jerusalem to Samaria to Rome. Genesis 1:1-31 was also pointed out referring to the plurality of God's design.

Antone's reference to Matthew 28:16-20 is an attempt to resolve the seeming contradiction between carrying out the mission of Christ (sometimes confused as the mission of a Church) through evangelization and the way Christian denominations must relate with one another. Likewise, it is recommendable that this reference to Matthew 28:16-20 be used as material source in studying and resolving the Christian Catholic position of doing mission, evangelization, and interreligious dialogue.

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⁹ Hendrickx, *A Key to the Gospel*, 3-4.

¹⁰ The book *Introducing the Theologies of Religions* by Paul Knitter has a comprehensive discussion of "fulfillment model" aka inclusivist model, as well as the "mutualist model".



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