

## OUR MISSION

2 Cor. 13:11-13; Matt. 28:16-20

In the New Testament, baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” appears only once, and that is in Matthew 28:19, which is part of our Gospel for today. The setting for this verse is the so-called “great commission,” when after his resurrection Jesus is portrayed as sending his disciples out to make disciples of all nations.

You should know that the Gospel of Matthew was written somewhere between the year 80 and 90 CE, probably in Syria and probably for Jewish readers. There is some evidence that the original form of the passage was “baptizing them in *my* name,” meaning Jesus’ name, rather than “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Some scholars believe that “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” reflects Matthew’s own thinking. Still others believe the phrase reflects the baptismal practice in Matthew’s community. No scholars using the most reputable methods of biblical research believe that the words “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” came from Jesus. I should note here that for much, and I dare say, for most of Christian history it was sufficient to baptize in the name of Jesus or in the name of Christ. In any case, the idea of the Holy Trinity is not a biblical teaching except in the most extended sense. The church developed teachings about the Trinity primarily to clarify the place of Jesus in reference to belief in one God, Creator of the heavens and the earth. Traditional trinitarian language was exclusively masculine, thereby reinforcing

the absurdity that God is male. In our effort at Emanuel to preserve the understanding of God as Trinity, we have adopted the expression “Source, Word, and Spirit,” which has many things to commend it as a trinitarian formula beyond being gender-neutral.

Having suggested to you that the best biblical scholarship does not believe that Jesus urged his followers to baptize using the words “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” I’d like to move ahead to the question of whether Jesus urged his followers “to make disciples of all nations.” Is this something that Jesus did?

We cannot answer this question with any certainty. The sayings that we have of Jesus are filtered through the church, in effect are statements about what the early followers of Jesus believed about him. What we know of Jesus, we know from people who believed in him and wanted him to be known by others, people who experienced something in Jesus that moved them and changed them for the better and which they wanted to pass on. They, of course, had no idea how far and for how long their beliefs about Jesus would travel. They thought that the end of things was not very far off. They didn’t imagine that one day there would be Christians in North America and South America and Europe and throughout Asia and the South Pacific. They didn’t know that there were such places. They lived in a little world, an outpost of the Roman Empire. We can hardly imagine how small was their universe and how provincial. The “great commission” speaks of “all nations,” but there were at the time no such things as nations in the modern sense that we know them. It would perhaps be better to say “peoples,” meaning clans and tribes and racial-ethnic groups with which the early Christians were acquainted. Theirs was a small world. The Easter miracle, of course, is that from this

tiny movement in the backwater of Palestine arose the most populous religion on the planet.

Though not always for the good of all concerned.

From the first it has been all but impossible to pass on the gospel of Christ without at the same time passing on the cultural values of those doing the passing. That is the history of missionary activity. What does it say, for example, to peoples of color when the Christian images that are imported to them are all of white Europeans, to say nothing of being all male? What does it mean when in the course of being missionized people are told to be docile and humble before the military and mercantile interests of the countries from which the missionaries have come, even as these interests seize native land and denigrate native traditions and make the missionized poor? Too frequently have Christian missionizing activities been expressions of arrogance, as if God could not love those who had not embraced the faith of the missionaries.

I read recently of a public school in New York City that allows its space to be used by an evangelical church for the cost of janitorial services. A mother of a child attending the school became aware of this and decided to attend a church service to find out what was going on.

“‘Notice the names of the children on pieces of paper,’ the pastor advised his flock. I looked around and saw the posters the kids had made, with their charming snapshots from summer holidays and rambling lists of likes and dislikes. ‘Pray for them!’ the pastor continued. ‘Pray that the families of this school will come to Jesus and say, “This is a house of God.”’”

“A number of [these] new churches are the work of national ‘church planting’ organizations attracted to New York by the combination of cheap space and the opportunity to save the city from its apparent godlessness. Some are closely associated with national groups known for their hostility to ‘government education.’ The church that meets in my daughter’s school is associated with a movement that instructs its members to pray for a Christian reformation of American education and for the election of like-minded political leaders.” (Katherine Stewart, *The New York Times*. 6/12/11, “Sunday Opinions”, p. 10)

What right does the church in this New York City school have to make a picture of a little girl who is educated there an occasion for their worship? Why should tax-payer dollars be used to underwrite religious groups who presume tax-payers who are not like-minded are bound for hell? One doesn’t have to go far back in history or to far-away lands to find instances of missionary arrogance. It is right across the river from us, and, I am sure, much closer than that as well.

Last Sunday, on the Day of Pentecost, I spoke to you of why Christianity spread and grew throughout the world even as Judaism did not. I said that whereas Judaism was a religion primarily of blood and clan, Christianity was a religion of Spirit that could be conveyed to and joined by anyone who believed, regardless of blood or clan. Further, I observed that Jewish thinking at its best does not see the Jews’ relationship to God as a privilege but rather as the responsibility to *show* by their faithfulness to the law how justice can be served and community built. Their leadership is by example, not indoctrination. They had no obligation before God to make other people Jewish. It was quite enough to witness to a life of godliness as they understood it for all to see its

benefits. Christians inherited this mission to witness from Judaism but reinterpreted to mean that the godly must be Christians rather than simply that Christians must be godly. And thus, the arrogance of Christian evangelism as it has so often been pursued.

I am certain that the new members who joined Emanuel last week did not do so because they thought they were bound for hell if they didn't join. I am fairly certain that they joined because they saw something worthy in the community of Emanuel, a kind of faithfulness that looked like Jesus and felt like an honest questing for understanding of who any of us is before God and in the presence of one another. This in addition perhaps to the congregation's efforts to care for those who are struggling, both outside its membership as well as within it. Or to put this another way, my hope is that they, who are we, felt and feel that the words of the Apostolic Greeting, "The grace of our Savior Jesus Christ, the love of God, the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all," are at Emanuel meant, and heartfelt, and the truest reflection of what the Christian faith and our little part of it has to offer the world in the name of God. Amen.

The Holy Trinity, June 19, 2011

Emanuel Lutheran Church