

**Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”** (NIV 84)

Theme: Christ is always with us as we carry out his Great Commission

Why do we exist as a congregation? What is the purpose of Holy Cross? What is the point of any Christian church? There are many congregations that write up some sort of mission statement about what the purpose of their congregation is—and any good mission statement is going to be based off of the words of our text. These words are known as “the Great Commission” for they are Jesus’ words to his Church, explaining what their purpose is and what job they are supposed to do: it is to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and by teaching.

Many people have their opinion about what a purpose of a church is. I’ve heard people say that church is where you go “to celebrate life’s biggest events.” I suppose by that they mean it’s a place you to get baptized, married, and buried—some might through confirmation in there as well. So is that it, is that why we exist as a congregation, to be a place where people can celebrate certain milestones in life? No, of course not—and were not even going to get into the problem with considering baptisms, weddings, confirmations, and funerals’ simply as “events” or “special occasions” in life.

For some a Church is a place to go to celebrate during the holidays—it’s simply what you do. You hear people say that part of their Christmas tradition is to go to a worship service on Christmas Eve or it just doesn’t seem right to not worship on Easter or not eat a big Easter breakfast in the basement. So for some church is a place to go in order to fulfill some sense of tradition or habit. Many people who think this way go to worship on these days and they feel good about themselves that they did something good and that God is pleased with them for at least they took the time out of their busy holiday schedules to worship,

unlike many other people. Of course, we exist in part so that we can worship on Christmas Eve and Easter—but really those are just two ways we fulfill what the Lord wants us to do.

For a good amount of people, church is a place to go to in order to be entertained. They want to hear good music—maybe we can play some guitars and some drums, have a rock band stand up in front to play some contemporary Christian songs—that would put more people through our doors and no one would fall asleep! They like sermons where the pastor tells a lot of jokes, shares a bunch of personal stories, and makes real and relevant connections with his hearers. Who cares about the content or the doctrines that are taught, as long as the sermon is interesting and engaging? Why stop at concerts and stand-up, we could put on some plays or pageants—how great would that be! Is that why we are here, for entertainment purposes as if we are movie theater or night club? Again, of course not—although some would prefer it.

Others see church as a place to hang out with friends, like a social-club of sorts. They say, “I belong to Holy Cross because I have always belonged to Holy Cross. This is where I’ve gone all my life, this is where my family is, and many of my friends go here. You get to catch-up on all the latest gossip, make some business connections, or just say ‘hi’ to that person in the pew behind me.”

Or maybe we just exist for the sole purpose of existing. We are here because we’ve always been here, and we’ll do all we can to remain here as long as possible. Is that the purpose of a church—simply to exist? It may seem like when you look at some congregations—they don’t really do much; you never hear anything about them, it doesn’t seem as there is any purpose for their existence other than to simply exist—and they will do everything they can simply to exist rather than fulfilling the purpose of why they exist in the first place!

And what is that purpose? Again, it goes back to the Great Commission: **go and make disciples of all nations.** That is the sole purpose, the one and only reason why Holy Cross exists—to make disciples for Christ. Now, how this actually plays out in a congregation could take many forms but it all goes back to making disciples through the gospel.

We do this first by baptizing all nations—infants included. We baptize them in the name of the Triune God because through baptism sins are washed away, faith is given by the Holy Spirit, and Christ adopts the baptized as his own dear children. Through baptism, then, we become disciples, or followers of Christ, and through baptism we are saved. But baptism is useless without faith and there are many who weren't baptized as infants. Therefore there is another means by which we make disciples—actually it is the same means, the gospel, just a different form: the Word.

Jesus said we make disciples **by teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you**. Through the gospel the Holy Spirit works faith and strengthens faith; he causes us to grow in grace and knowledge of him and his love. And so to make disciples we spread the Word, especially the gospel. Notice, then, how in both of these means, baptism and the spreading of the Word, we aren't the ones who are actually making disciples—it is the Holy Spirit who is doing all the work. So it's not really our job to make disciples—as if we have to do the converting; it's our job as a congregation to spread the gospel so that the Holy Spirit can do his job of making disciples.

So it doesn't matter who is spreading the gospel, it doesn't matter who is teaching, or preaching, or who the pastor is. The effectiveness of the gospel does not depend on the person sharing it, but on the Holy Spirit. We certainly can get in the way of the Holy Spirit by not sharing the Word, or only part of it; but the Holy Spirit works through the same gospel with the same power no matter who is sharing it.

So all we have to do is spread the gospel—telling other people about the message of Christ—who he is and what he has done to save us. Sin separates us from God; but Christ sacrificed himself on the cross for us, removing our guilt and giving us his perfect life. Jesus took away what we couldn't have and made us what we needed to be. So as a result of Christ's work we have been restored to a right relationship with God. By his resurrection from the dead he has won for us eternal life and the ultimate victory over all our spiritual enemies. We know that because Christ lives, we too will live even though we die. So we don't do anything to be saved—Christ has done everything for us.

Therefore we know that we are saved. We receive this gift through faith, which is worked in us through the gospel, so again it all depends on the Lord, not on us. This is the gospel; this is the message of the

Church and the reason why we exist—to tell others about the world's one and only Savior!

But it is the church's job not just to spread the gospel but to share all of God's Word—Jesus told us, **to teach them to obey everything I have commanded you**. That means both law and gospel. That means everything found in the Word, not holding back or downplaying the law because people don't want to hear about their sins, or be reminded about how wicked they are or how helpless they are to save themselves. It means that we don't back down when society attacks us, calls us names, or makes fun of us for believing what the Bible has to say and insisting that all of God's Word is truth. We are to teach all of God's Word, not just some of it.

And who do we teach this to? We start first with our own members. We do learn God's Word somewhat in worship services—and so we are learning all of God's Word from our births, for the Holy Spirit can even work faith in the hearts of infants. But we only worship for an hour a week and so the knowledge we learn in worship is limited; we really learn more of God's Word outside of worship. So we start in Sunday school, learning the basic Bible stories, the foundation of our knowledge. We move on to Confirmation Class where we learn the basic of Christian doctrine. But that shouldn't be the end of our learning. That is only scratching the service. No, our teaching of everything Christ has commanded us is a life-long endeavor and so our learning of God's Word. We can never know all of God's Word, each time we open up the Bible we learn something new or we are reminded of something we forgot—it would be ignorant to think that we know all there is to know about God's Word. And so our learning of God's Word continues all the days of our lives. For this reason we not only teach our kids through Sunday School, VBS and the like, but we also have adult Bible studies so that our own members may sit at Jesus feet and learn from the ultimate teacher—Christ. And how is teaching our own members part of making disciples of all nations? Because it is only through the gospel that we are kept in the one true faith, kept as disciples of Christ.

But the job of the church is not just in-reach, but also outreach. We make disciples of all nations by spread the gospel that others may hear and believe God's Word. That we may tell them of the love of Christ and how he saved us from our sins. We do this on a local level by telling others we know about Jesus. But we can't reach everyone by

ourselves. This is part of the reason why Holy Cross is part of the WELS. This way we can pool our resources together to train future pastors and teachers who will baptize and teach all of God's Word, to start new congregations throughout our great country that others may hear the sweet message of the gospel, and to send missionaries to all nations that people in foreign countries, speaking foreign languages may hear the gospel for the first time and so that the Holy Spirit may work faith into their hearts and make them his disciples.

So this is why we exist—this is why we as individual Christians have joined together to form Holy Cross. It is to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and by teaching and thus also learning everything that God's Word says. We teach our own as much as we can and we spread the message of Christ to all who will listen!

And we have comfort and encouragement to carry out our duty as a Christian congregation—the Lord will always be with us, **surely I will be with you always to the very end of the age.** As we go throughout the world preaching and teaching and spreading the gospel, we know that the Lord is behind us, blessing his Work, making it bud and flourish. We know that our work is not in vain, for it accomplishes the desire that God wants. We might even face some backlash from wicked human beings, but God still is beside us and will watch over us and bless us. And so we have no fear of spreading the gospel.

That is the job of Holy Cross; that is why we exist. We don't exist to be a place for entertainment and we aren't a social club. Some big events in life do take place within these four walls, but again, that's not our purpose. And we certainly don't exist for the sole purpose of existing.

The reason for Holy Cross is to carry out the Great Commission—to spread the gospel, to baptize all nations and to share all of God's Word to all people. And if that is what our purpose is, then we do all we can to carry out that purpose, to support that purpose, and to make use of that purpose. For we know that God will bless our work for his Word does not return to him empty. Amen.