

Understanding Truth, Living Reconciliation

Daniel 1: 1–7 and Matthew 28: 19–20

by Rev. Mark Tremblay

“Go and make disciples of all peoples, baptizing them...” These words written by Matthew came to be known as the great commission in the nineteenth century. It became the primary ‘mission text’. However, like most passages of scripture, there can be radically different applications and interpretations depending on one’s culture, beliefs, norms, etc. It can become dangerous when one’s context influence the word of God.

In Canada, to make disciples of Jesus Christ, indigenous cultures, languages and families had to be denied. Here, to be a disciple of Jesus meant that you had to become civilized. Here, you had to attend an industrial school, later called a residential school, if you were an indigenous person.

How did The Presbyterian Church in Canada get involved in Residential Schools?

In 1886, the Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest adopted a resolution that, “it is desirable that schools be established at which children may be boarded and so removed from the injurious influence of their home life.” Further, it resolved that, “more Industrial Schools should be established.”¹ The following month, the Twelfth General Assembly approved the Report of the Foreign Mission Committee in which it said, “We have, in our own experience, abundant proof that the Indian can be Christianized and civilized. And it is our duty to do much more than we ever yet attempted, to bring our pagan fellow-countrymen under the enlightening and purifying influence of that truth which has done so much for ourselves.”² With reference for the need of such schools and of the work on one of the reserves, it is reported,

We have been much encouraged in our experiment (i.e., of a school in which poor Indian children are both boarded and taught) during the past two winters; and we feel that we can

recommend a school of this kind on a large scale to the sympathy of the church. We have read of asylums for dogs and cats; and the work is spoken of as a work of mercy. Are not these children better than they? Is it a work to be despised to take these little ones, and lift them up from the poverty and filth and paganism in which we find them to become useful citizens of our country, and sharers with us of the bright hope of a better life beyond? ... They would thus be under our own control, and away from the pernicious influence of the pagan.³

The Industrial School model, which would later be called the Residential School, began with the two-fold purpose of making Christians and good citizens. The report in the Acts of Proceedings of 1891 claims, "it was not hard to see that the Church in this work is not only redeeming souls from superstition and vice, but is rendering the noblest service to the country in training citizens."⁴

The Church did not invent the idea of the industrial school but, knowingly or not, it collaborated with the government's goals of reducing the annual cost of Treaties made with Indigenous nations by reducing or eliminating those to whom the annuity would be paid. Though the Church may have been blind to the financial motivation of the government, it relished in government support of Christianizing the heathen. One of the teachers commented, "In this work among the Indians there are grand possibilities opening before our Church and God has touched the hearts of the people so that money for carrying on the work is more readily available than ever before. It is ours to see that the work is conducted along right lines; that both Government and Church do their work in such a way that the Indian is developed rather than degraded by the help he receives."⁵ While it sounds that making Christians of all people is a fulfillment of Matthew's great commission, we shall see that national and cultural circumstances skewed our interpretation of that passage. As the church repents of its cultural arrogance, it must also revise its understanding of the great commission.

The idea of the industrial school was born alongside the Government's desire to reduce and eliminate support of Indian nations and the Indian Department. After the war of 1812 ended, and there was no further need of a military alliance with Indigenous people, there were annual comments and questions in the British parliament regarding the expense of the Indian Department. In 1820, the Governor of

Upper Canada proposed through industry and instruction that the intention should be to civilize aboriginal children. Eight years later, the Head of the Indian Department would propose to the Colonial Secretary that Indian people should be settled on farms, and provided educational facilities and religious instruction. From this time, and for decades to come, the public discussion promoted the same idea. The best thing for the Indigenous people in the Canadas was that they should become Christian farmers. This was understood as the best means to remove the burden on the public purse.

During the early 1830's, the British government appointed a Parliamentary Select Committee to report on Aboriginal Tribes in British Settlements. The Report was circulated for a couple of years by the Aborigine Protection Society.

Independently of the obligations of conscience to impart the blessings we enjoy, we have had abundant proof that it is greatly for our advantage to have dealings with civilized men rather than with barbarians. Savages are dangerous neighbours and unprofitable customers, and if they remain as degraded denizens of our colonies, they become a burthen upon the state.⁶

The Report, already in the 1830's, acknowledged the injustice in the treatment of Aboriginals living in or near British Settlements in the Colonies.

It might be presumed that the native inhabitants of any land have an incontrovertible right to their own soil: a plain and sacred right, however, which seems not to have been understood. Europeans have entered their borders uninvited, and, when there, have not only acted as if they were undoubted lords of the soil, but have punished the natives as aggressors if they have evinced a disposition to live in their own country.⁷

The policies of civilization were impositions of European religion, commerce, law and culture for the betterment of a perceived lesser civilization. Aboriginals needed to become like the Settlers. This idea was never questioned even by those advocating for their protection. The justification for this seems to be the influence of William Carey's, An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens in 1792 that gave rise to the mission slogan of the nineteenth century. The imperative to make disciples came to be called the great commission.⁸

One scholar comments, “by the end of the nineteenth century Matthew 28:18–20 had completely superseded other verses from Scripture as principal ‘mission text’.”¹⁰ The churches’ missionary zeal was noticed by those researching governmental solutions on the ways and means of reducing the expense of public money to Indigenous people who were becoming more dependent because of diminished food stocks as land was being taken by the settlers. Colonization made it difficult, if not impossible, to live by the traditional ways.

In 1841, the Province of Canada was formed through the union of Upper and Lower Canada. The responsibility for Indian affairs was transferred to the Governor General of British North America. The following year, he commissioned a study on the relationship with Indians and the efficiency of the Indian Department. In 1844, the Bagot Commission reported its findings. Although the report affirmed the rights of Indigenous people to possess their lands and to be compensated for land surrenders, it also recommended the creation of Indian Boarding Schools to teach the children animal husbandry, mechanical trades and domestic economy. There were already denominational experiments operative in Ontario. The report suggested that all religious groups should receive cooperation from the Indian Department in implementing the new education policy.

Three years later, Egerton Ryerson, the champion of public school education for all children in Upper Canada, responded to a request from the Assistant Superintendent of Indian Affairs in Montreal to provide his opinion about Indian education. He would recommend in his report that Indigenous people should be educated in industrial schools. As partial justification for that, he said,

[I]t is a fact established by numerous experiments that the North American Indian cannot be civilized or preserved in a state of civilization (including habits of industry and sobriety) except in connection with, if not by the influence of, not only religious instruction and sentiment but of religious feelings.⁹

and,

Agriculture being the chief interest, and probably the most suitable employment of the civilized Indians, I think the great object of industrial schools should be to fit the pupils for

becoming working farmers and agricultural labourers, fortified of course by Christian principles, feelings and habits.¹⁰

This was not what he believed nor wrote about for the education for white children. Ryerson wrote in 1843 that, “no child shall be compelled to read any religious book or attend any religious exercise contrary to the wishes of his parents and guardians.”¹¹ This hypocritical understanding was the expression of a common Eurocentric and racist belief that, in Ryerson’s words, “[t]he theory of a certain kind of educational philosophy is falsified in respect to the Indian: with him nothing can be done to improve and elevate his character and condition without the aid of religious feeling.”¹²

In 1879, the Federal Government sought the best method of delivering education for Indigenous people. The Gradual Civilization Act (1857) evolved into the Indian Act (1876). The numbered Treaties signed in the West secured the possibility of a railroad, but each Treaty promised the supply of education. Nicolas Flood Davin would confirm the efficacy of a residential model in his report to the new Government of Canada which was based on his research of the success of the educational system being used in the United States. There, the educational policy was part of the US government’s program of ‘aggressive civilization’. The failure of these day schools was in not getting the children out of their homes and away from the influence of their parents. The report also noted that, “the education given in Indian schools is, as a rule, of a poor sort.”¹³

The Presbyterian Church participated in the education of Indigenous children, first through day schools and by the mid 1880’s through residential schools. The interpretation of Matthew’s imperative, to make disciples of all peoples, helped drive the adoption of the residential model. Making disciples of all nations was interpreted to mean making all nations like us, which meant that they had to dress like us, talk like us, have names that sounded like ours and share the same economic and religious values that we have. As one Acts and Proceedings report noted,

The only hope of the Indian race is that it should be finally merged in the life of the country. We cannot afford to perpetuate separate nationalities and separate languages within our borders. Our nation, if it is to be a nation at all, must be homogeneous.¹⁴

In its fourth annual report (1880), the Women's Foreign Missionary Society cited its purpose which seems to have adopted the idea of civilizing Indigenous peoples. In fact, the comment went further to suggest that Christianity aided that desire. Women shall, "by industry, economy and self denial—setting aside the equivalent of luxuries, comforts, or even necessities—Presbyterian women shall, through the education and conversion of heathen women and girls, assist in opening to civilization, its handmaid, Christianity, the dark places of the earth."¹⁵

Recognizing that a new direction was needed and popular sentiment seemed to support the marriage of Christianizing with civilizing, the residential school model seemed to be the means to that end.

It is now conceded by all interested in the well-being of the Indian that a new departure must be made, in the methods heretofore generally adopted by both the Church and the Government, for the education of Indian children. The ordinary day school must give place to the boarding-school. The children must be taken from the wigwam with its pagan and barbarian surroundings, and placed in something like a Christian home, and brought under the influence of the life-giving and ennobling principles of the Gospel. And the boarding school is the only method that affords a reasonable prospect of the accomplishment of this end.¹⁶

Instead of instilling in us a respect for other cultures as we would have ours respected, our status as God's chosen adopted people seems to have made us arrogant. The same recognition was expressed in the mid 1830's by the Select Parliamentary Committee. "It will scarcely be denied in word, that, as an enlightened and Christian people, we are at least bound to do to the inhabitants of other lands, whether enlightened or not, as we should in similar circumstances desire to be done by."¹⁷

In retrospect, we understand how our participation in such acts of civilization were wrong. In 1994, The Presbyterian Church in Canada apologized for its participation in Residential Schools. Article four confesses our arrogance and culturally conditioned understanding of the gospel. Our complicity in this act of civilizing and Christianizing led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to call this cultural genocide. Our repentance must be more than offering an apology and a few dollars. It will be seen in the way we enable healing both in the indigenous community and in our own. We are now an arrogant

people who participated in and funded Residential Schools. Our reconciliation is to be sought with God as well as our Indigenous brothers and sisters. Reconciliation will begin when the way we treat and think about Indigenous people changes. It will continue when we change the way we interpret and use the gospel to justify our cultural biases and denominational beliefs to the exclusion of those not like us. We would do well to remember that, “Love does not insist on its own way.”

Reconciliation begins through listening to those who have been harmed and excluded. We must respond appropriately. In its final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission outlined Ten Principles of Reconciliation. There is clear direction for churches seeking reconciliation. The report says, “For churches, demonstrating long-term commitment requires atoning for actions within residential schools, respecting Indigenous spirituality, and supporting Indigenous people’s struggles for justice and equity.”¹⁸ As individuals and as Christian communities we should explore these principles, understand what they mean and work to support and implement them as we are able. As follow up to our 1994 Confession, we should study and find ways to act on these Ten Principles. How we live is the true confession of our lives. How we live will attract or drive away others seeking to be fellow disciples.

Matthew’s ending is not a departure from his overall purpose. It remains a declaration that Jesus is Emmanuel and there is a mission command that all disciples of Jesus have been given. New Testament scholar, Ulrich Luz notes, “With its special position at the end of the Gospel it is clear that Jesus’ mission command for the church has a fundamental significance. Matthew actually thinks that the church is basically and fundamentally a missionary church, and he conceives of its mission concretely as a ‘going’ to all nations.”¹⁹ However, that commission does not involve, and has never included a license for abuse, neglect, scorn, violence or taking advantage of someone simply because they are not Christian. Making disciples should not involve coercion, force, or be used to justify political or economic reasons for colonialization. Moreover, the misappropriation and misinterpretation of this text should not prevent us from understanding its context and what it demands of us as Jesus’ disciples.

Can we learn from our mistakes and misinterpretations of the gospel? Both, our understanding of God’s grace and our 1994 Confession, point to such possibilities but it requires that we admit there are

times when other factors have influenced our understanding and misappropriation of the gospel message. The gospel should never be used to justify our cultural preferences or to place one group of people in a privileged position over another. We witness to the dominion of Christ, not the dominion of the church, not the dominion of a particular theology, or a political/ economic ideology. As Luz reminds us, “mission, understood as proclamation of Jesus’ teaching and call to discipleship, is according to [Matthew] 28:18–20 an indispensable characteristic of the church.” He further claims that the text itself contains the meaning that can prevent the ‘abuse and misuse’ of missions.

1. Missions that is based on the power of the Lord of the universe, Jesus, possesses no instruments of power other than that which the Lord of the universe has given his disciples. It is the power of the Word that always shines only through the deeds before people (cf. 5:16); it is the power of the one who has been not the ruler but the servant of all (20:28).
2. Missions, understood as a proclamation of Jesus’ commandment that is focused in praxis, also itself has a criterion in the love that according to Matthew is the greatest of all the commandments that Jesus has directed his church to keep.²⁰

Finally, as we reflect on our own connection with the past and as we become more aware of how we have not honoured Christ’s command to love, we can repent through and invite God’s spirit to move in us, and among us, to breathe into us new life and a new understanding of mission, so that we might discern what it means to be a mission church today.

There are times we can step back and look at the work of our hands and be filled with joy for what we have helped create. The legacy of Residential Schools does not fill one with joy. Neither is it one of those times that we can simply abandon our project and leave it aside because it has become too difficult or because we are not able to understand what we should do next. We are called to reconcile by God and by those we failed to love. The fact that the Presbyterian Church in Canada operated residential schools was detrimental to Indigenous people from the outset. Our 1994 Confession states that, “we demanded more from Aboriginal people than the gospel requires.”

Our participation in healing and reconciliation will show to ourselves and to others that the principles of Christianity need not be the handmaid of civilization. Jesus Christ does not bless colonization. The aspirational value of Canada as a multi-cultural reality will not occur because we are all Christians. Rather, we can show each other and those who are not Christians that it is through Christ and in our walk along the Christ's path that transformation is possible. Mistakes can be faced; the long road of reconciliation is not lonely but is paved with love, and healing is at the end of our journey together.

¹ Minutes of the Synod of Manitoba and the Northwest, 20 May 1886, p 81.

² The Acts & Proceedings of the Twelfth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Presbyterian Printing and Publishing Company, Toronto, 1886, p xcii.

³ *ibid.*, p xciv.

⁴ The Acts & Proceedings of the Seventeenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Presbyterian Printing and Publishing Company, Toronto, 1891, p xxxiv.

⁵ *ibid.*, p xli.

⁶ Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes, (British Settlements), Reprinted with Comments by the "Aborigines Protection Society.", William Ball, Aldine Chambers, Paternoster Row, and Harchard & Son, Piccadilly, London, 1837, p 59.

⁷ *ibid.*, p 4.

⁸ See Luz, U., Matthew 21–28: a commentary. H. Koester, Ed., Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2005pp. 626–628. The section on History of Interpretation is reproduced here:

"The *ancient church* understood this command of Jesus to the eleven to refer to the apostles of that day, thus only to the initial period of the church (Justin *I Apol.* 31.7; Aristides *Apol.* 2.8). In keeping with this conviction there was the legend that the apostles had divided the world among themselves in order to take the gospel everywhere. Accordingly, the ancient church scarcely ever appealed to Matt 28:19a* for its own universal missionary task. Its missionary proclamation, which in the second and third centuries was largely a proclamation locally from house to house, could not easily be associated with 28:19a. Thus one seldom thought that this final charge of Jesus was not just meant for the apostles of the initial period. At the most, beginning with the Middle Ages it was able to be associated with apostolic succession. This took place in particular in connection with the promise of v. 20b that almost always was related to the whole church per successiones.

"Since the beginning of the *High Middle Ages* "mission" was accomplished primarily through the expansion of Christian territory, for the most part it was also true then that 28:19a was not a basic text of Christian missions. To my knowledge that was also true of the great missionaries of the sixteenth century who on behalf of the church and the Spanish or Portuguese crown went out to incorporate into the Christian world the newly "discovered" peoples, especially of America and to a lesser degree also of East Asia. In this way in the sixteenth century the Catholic Church became a truly worldwide church, and that made it easier to accept the schism created by the Reformation in a number of European countries.

"Nor did 28:19a play a role for the *Reformation's understanding* of mission. The verse first became a subject of controversy when the theologians of the Reformation had to defend themselves on two fronts. They were attacked from the Catholic side, especially by Bellarmine, with the charge that the Protestant churches were purely local and territorial churches in contrast to the Roman Catholic Church that now achieved a completely new ecumenical breadth through the Spanish and Portuguese mission in America and Asia. On the other side they had to defend themselves against a new interpretation of 28:19a especially by the Anabaptists, who applied Jesus' commission directly to the present. They defended themselves on the two fronts with the traditional interpretation that the command of Christ applied only to the apostles at the beginning of Christianity. In contrast to the Catholics they rejected an apostolic succession.

"The new impulses came from the Anabaptists and from individual theologians of the Protestant mainstream. The earliest Anabaptist itinerant preachers, who in their overall proclamation are quite close to Matthew, regarded both orthodox Catholic and Protestants as, for all practical purposes, heathens who first had to be brought to faith, and they regarded Europe as their mission field. Since at the same time they rejected any special priesthood, they interpreted Matt 28:19–20 and Mark 16:15–16 in terms of the present and of their own mission.⁹² Among the few "exceptions" from the Protestant mainstream in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we can cite Paracelsus, the Dutch Calvinist Adrian Saravia, and the Austrian Lutheran Justinian of Welz. The German Pietists took up this interpretive tradition, although Matt 28:18–20 did not play a central role for the Halle and Herrnhuter missionaries of the eighteenth century. Matt 28:19 first became the Magna Carta of missions through the English Baptist William Carey and his 1792 document, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of Heathens*. For Carey 28:19a is the central text of missions. Jesus' command is universal and for all times just as are the command to baptize in v. 19b and the promise of v. 20b. Through Carey 28:19a became "*the mission command*" that influenced the church and evangelical missionary societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that grew out of the revival movements. I cite as an example the Dutch Calvinist Abraham Kuyper. For him, as for many, 28:19a was an absolute *command*. He understood mission as issuing from God's sovereignty rather than from God's love and correspondingly as "obedience to God's command," "not an invitation, but a charge, an order."

“Toward the end of the nineteenth century, for Gustav Warneck, the father of modern Protestant mission scholarship, 28:19 is the “charter of missions”; “to make disciples” as a missionary task is “tantamount to making Christians of non-Christians.” Since Christianity is a world religion and “all root ideas of the gospel are directed toward a general salvation of the world, therefore the gospel story concludes with a missionary command, and therefore this missions command constitutes a central task of the Christian Church.” Warneck connects the idea of work with individual persons with the idea of a mission to nations. If “to make disciples” means “to move people to submit to the influence of Jesus as their teacher and savior and to increase this influence over their lives,” then “the nations” (τὰ ἔθνη) points to christianizing nations: the national churches are “the school in which human beings are trained nationally in discipleship.”

“Through Warneck 28:19 then also became a basic text for the Catholic understanding of missions. Jesus’ mission command takes precedence over the papal and episcopal succession of the entire church. In almost classical form Ceslas Spicq states the *Catholic position*: “By virtue of the power received from his Father (Matt 28:18–20) Jesus authorizes his apostles to teach. This authority is unlimited. The hierarchy has the right to promulgate the doctrine and the precepts of Christ.” Matt 28:19–20 is also *the* key biblical text for the church’s missionary task in the new “Catechism of the Catholic church,” even if it is based on the “eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity” and God’s love for all people rather than simply on a command of Jesus read literally from the Bible.

“In the twentieth century 28:19 is for the 1974 evangelical International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne the fundamental mandate of Jesus Christ on which the preamble of the “Lausanne Covenant” is based. Thus 28:19 was here the basic text of those who sharply criticized the “efforts to change the world” and the interreligious dialogue emanating from the World Council of Churches and those who fundamentally separated themselves from the church’s task of world missions. In evangelical missions 28:19a was naturally understood primarily in the sense of the conversion of individuals.

“In many places people outside the evangelical movements have become more cautious about 28:19. Werner Ustorf speaks, for example, of the “falsely so-called ‘missions command’ of Matt 28:19 that had to serve for a kind of militarization of the practice of missions.” He does “not (say): ‘Go and establish churches’”; it is rather a matter “of the kingdom of God in the world.” Reflected in this judgment is, on the one hand, the understanding of 28:19a as an absolute command of Christ and, on the other hand, a deep skepticism toward every mission connected with the church’s exercise of and claims to power.”

⁹ Statistics respecting Indian Schools with Dr. Ryerson’s Report of 1847 attached, Government Printing Bureau, Ottawa, 1898, p 73.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p 74.

¹¹ quoted in Putnam, J.H., Egerton Ryerson and education in upper Canada. Toronto, William Briggs, 1912, page 177f. See also Egerton Ryerson, the Residential School System and Truth and Reconciliation, Ryerson University’s Aboriginal Education Council, August, 2010, quoted in Note 13, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egerton_Ryerson. Retrieved 15 September 2017.

¹² Ryerson, *op. cit.*, p 73

¹³ Davin, N.F., Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds, Ottawa, 1879. p 15

¹⁴ The Acts & Proceedings of the Sixteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Presbyterian Printing and Publishing Company, Toronto, 1891, p xxix–xxxi.

¹⁵ Fourth Annual Report of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Presbyterian Church in Canada (western Section), Presbyterian Printing House, Toronto, 1880, pg 12.

¹⁶ The Acts & Proceedings of the Fourteenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, Presbyterian Printing and Publishing Company, Toronto, 1888, p xiv.

¹⁷ *op. cit.* The purpose of the Parliamentary Select Committee is that it was “appointed to consider what Measures ought to be adopted with regard to the Native Inhabitants of Countries where British Settlements are made, and to the neighbouring Tribes, in order to secure to them the due observance of Justice and the protection of their Rights; to promote the spread of Civilization among them, and to lead them to the peaceful and voluntary reception of the Christian Religion.” p 1f.

¹⁸ Canada’s Residential Schools: Reconciliation, The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Volume 6, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015, p 17.

¹⁹ Luz, *op. cit.* p 636.

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 636.

The worship resources for Mission Awareness Sunday have been written by The Rev. Mark Tremblay. Mark was called to Knox church in 2012. He was attracted by the unique passion for Worship, Justice he experienced from the Knox congregation.

He has degrees in Philosophy, Religion and Theology. He has ministered to Churches in Brampton, Bermuda, and Eastern Ontario. He strives to bring recent scholarship and post-constantinian thinking to his exegesis and proclamation of the gospel; preaching should be educational, relevant and challenging. He also believes that the church is called to be part of the wider community in which it resides.

Mark and his wife, Liz, enjoy walking through Fish Creek Park with their two dogs and getting out of Calgary to explore the mountains. They have four adult children.