

(Developed from thoughts presented in a devotional to the Belhaven College Board of Church Advocates by Breck Castleman.)

*And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. God therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."*

Matthew 28:18-20

I hear most people refer to this "Great Commission" in terms of its call to evangelism. Making disciples begins with a call to faith. It is the Church's Christ-given task and it has a world-wide dimension. We must take the good news of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done to the whole world.

And it seems most people see evangelism in terms of how they were evangelized. People who have come to faith through person-to-person evangelism tend to focus on that particular method. People who have come to faith out of their participation in the worship and ministry of the Church, tend to stress worship and church program as opportunities for presenting the Gospel and calling others to follow Jesus.

What appears to be neglected in how many Christians understand the "Great Commission" is its educational component. The basic task to which Jesus calls us is to "make disciples." One part of that task is evangelism, calling people to faith in Jesus Christ. We are to bring them to the place, where they are declared the recipients of God's grace and beneficiaries of the covenant promises of God. Baptism marks their entrance into a covenant relationship with their Creator. But the other part of making disciples is education – "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

And even here I think that many Christians have understood this part of our "commission" in terms that are too narrow. It does refer to Christian education programs in the local congregation. That seems obvious. But we need to expand our understanding of what it means to "make disciples" to include higher education. Education at the college and university level must involve the active support of the Church in the task of teaching people to be followers of Jesus – to do all that the Lord has commanded them to do.

The "first and great commandment", which Jesus drew out of the canon of Hebrew Scripture was, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). When the Church of Jesus Christ makes disciples and teaches its members to do all that Jesus has commanded, it will teach people to love the Lord their God with *all their mind*. For the Christian, every course of study, every class taken, every idea and concept learned must be turned to the purpose of loving God. Any academic effort, which is carried out independently of this command, is foolish disobedience and a denial of God's sovereignty over all of life.

Belhaven College has set its purpose to this end: fulfilling the “Great Commission” by teaching its students to love the Lord their God with all their minds. This is what the integration of faith and learning and life is all about.

There are many pastors and many church members, however, who have not seen the connection between the teaching task given to the Church in Matthew 28:20 and higher education. I think it is one of the tasks of the Board of Church Advocates to help churches make that connection.

The need to get the Church involved in supporting Christians in higher education is illustrated by something my wife shared with me. As a staff worker with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship at Florida State University, she led a faculty Bible study. One professor expressed his appreciation for the group because it was the one place where he could be both an academician and Christian at the same time. At a state university, it was not considered appropriate for him to bring his faith in any open way into his department. He went on to say that at his church, people didn’t seem interested or concerned about how he functioned at the university as a Christian scholar. He couldn’t bring his faith to work, and unfortunately, he couldn’t bring his work into his faith community for understanding and support. His church hadn’t seen the connection between its “commission” and this professor’s work.

The college and university is the Church’s mission field. The Church must be involved in teaching Christians to love the Lord their God with all their minds. The mission of Belhaven College should not be carried out without the active interest, understanding and support of the Church. The mission of Christians working and teaching within secular universities should not be carried out without the same active interest, understanding and support. It is my feeling that Belhaven’s Board of Church Advocates is in a unique position to help the Church to make the connection between the “Great Commission” and the learning that takes place in college and university classrooms. When we challenge the Church to fulfill its Christ-given mandate by its active involvement in the arena of higher education, then we serve not only the Lord, but also the world, which the Lord came to save.

“Non ministrari, sed ministrare.”