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THE END IS WHERE WE START FROM: MISSION AND THE FAREWELL DISCOURSE IN MATTHEW 28:18-19

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The Farewell Discourse of Matthew 28:18-19 presents a virtual compendium of insight into the mission of the early church. Using these final words of Jesus, this article analyzes the strategic foundation of the farewell discourse in this passage and argues that it summarizes both the Gospel and the Mission of the church. This article specifically analyses the social and cultural impact of this passage using Vernon Robbins' model of socio-rhetorical analysis and integrates strategic leadership theory throughout this analysis. From this analysis, leaders can utilize elements in articulating the mission of their own organizations.

*What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.*
- T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

I. INTRODUCTION

A revered CEO stands up in front of his eleven Vice Presidents and gives a riveting speech to them. He speaks articulately, passionately and succinctly while inspiring every tidbit of their imaginations. He speaks with energy and gives them a mission to carry out in the future. Every word—all 61 of them—echoes around the room and reverberates in the heads of those listening. They take notes and compare their notes to make sure they scribed every word perfectly. The CEO then walks out the door, leaves the building and is tragically killed while driving to another meeting. His followers' last memory of him is this riveting speech, and the eleven leaders in the room leave that day to devote the rest of their lives to living and carrying out the words that leader spoke. They promote their mission everywhere they go and expand their organization to become the longest lasting, fastest expanding, most controversial, most life changing organization in human history, complete with the most patriotic and

dedicated employees the world has ever seen. They literally infiltrate every aspect of every segment of every world culture. And it starts with one, 61-word speech.

It seems like a far-fetched scenario in today's world. We are so oversaturated with communication, preaching and advertisements, that the spoken word's power is diluted. We literally see thousands of advertisements every day. Mission statements are bantered about, posted on beautiful and colorful plaques, and hidden away on the wall of the organization's board room. Do those words actually get taken to heart? How many people can quote their organization's mission, let alone live it out? We like to analyze the phonetics of speech, without taking to heart the long-lasting meaning of words. We know the power of words, but we rarely live out the power of those words.

The farewell discourse of Matthew 28 describes nearly this exact scenario. After Jesus is resurrected, He returned to His disciples for a short period of time, talked to them, and then left shortly after. Before He left, He summed up His entire ministry in a few actions and words and started the greatest revolution in human history. These 61 words form the mission statement of the early church:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-19, NRSV).

Jesus stated His authority, gave his followers a mission to carry out, and reminded and encouraged them that He will always be with them. It provides a "virtual compendium" of Christian theology packed within 20 verses.¹ The entire Gospel can be summed up in this passage and this discourse has impacted all of humanity for the past 2000 years. The mission may also be the key to unraveling the mystery of the entire Gospel.² This article analyzes the strategic foundation of the farewell discourse in this passage and argues that it summarizes both the Gospel and the Mission of the church. This article specifically analyses the social and cultural impact of this passage using Robbins' model of socio-rhetorical analysis³ and integrates strategic leadership theory throughout this analysis.

II. TARGET AUDIENCE

A mission does not have to wait for talent; rather, it creates talent *through* the mission. This is not a subtle difference. The target audience of this mission was a small, select group of people. Verse 16 seems to indicate that only the eleven disciples heard the mission initially (Judas Iscariot was not part of this group). These men were to become the disciplers, baptizers and teachers in the mission Jesus was giving them. The mission of the church is 100% clear in this passage, and not enigmatic or indirect like much of the Pauline writings. Krentz notes that Matthew's version of Jesus' words is

¹ D. Day, "A Fresh Reading of Jesus' Last Words: Matthew 28:16:20," *Review and Expositor* (Spring 2007): 104.

² E. Krentz, "Make disciples: Matthew on Evangelism," *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 33, no.1 (February 2006): 25.

³ V.K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996): chapter 3.

the only direct commandment to go and make disciples in the New Testament.⁴ We do not know this group's initial response, but we do know their long-term response: a determination to carry out this mission until death. Tradition states that ten of these eleven men later died for their faith. The eleventh (John) was almost killed and was eventually exiled to the Island of Patmos.

Jesus did not target his mission to all of humanity at this point, even though it affected all of humanity. This narrow focus towards His disciples is important to note. A mission statement needs to include a target audience of people who are empowered to carry it out. It becomes "a guiding star by which to steer the organization"⁵ but those who follow the star need to know that they are to follow that star. Jesus was clear in his focus on a select group of eleven men that would later revolutionize the world.

It is also important to note that these eleven men were not "superstars" before the mission. They became "superstars" *because* of the mission. Jesus did invest three years of training into these men but they still doubted him at the end. Once the mission was established, all their inadequacies were left behind and they moved forward at a rapid pace. The mission set the bar so high that in striving to achieve it, they became immortalized in history as being the founding fathers of the Christian revolution.

III. SPECIFIC SOCIAL TOPICS

This passage was spoken and later written within a specific social context. This context gives us insight into the world around the people the text is about and was written for. Specifically, the conversionist, revolutionist and utopian social types of responses can help us understand the sociological impact of this passage.⁶

Conversionist

Robbins describes the conversionist response as being characterized by a view that the world is corrupt because people are corrupt.⁷ Jesus preached many times that the world is corrupt, and that he was bringing a new, revolutionary Kingdom to earth. To begin this Kingdom, he needed ambassadors to preach the Good News, and these ambassadors would need a mission to guide their journey. Over time, these people would help convert people through discipling, baptizing and teaching them.

This conversionist approach is weaved throughout Matthew and the other Gospels. In one example, Matthew writes:

"when [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest' (Matthew 9:36-38).

Simeon prophecies that Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). Matthew 4:17 states that Jesus began to

⁴ Krentz, *Make Disciples*, 2006

⁵ W.J. Pfeiffer, *Shaping Strategic Planning*, (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman Trade, 1989): 120.

⁶ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 72-74

⁷ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 72.

proclaim “repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near,” implying that this was a constant theme that Jesus spoke of.

The final words of Jesus outline the mission of the Christians to “make disciples of all nations”. This implies that many people were not already disciples and needed to be made into a disciple. They needed to be converted in order to join Jesus’ new revolutionary utopia. Shepard notes that Jesus’ command was not to just evangelize, but rather, to change all aspects of an individual’s spiritual and social life by the power of the Gospel. They are to be immersed in the character of the triune God.⁸ This passage is bluntly clear about the need for conversion.

The conversionist approach relates to organizations as well. It may be obvious to church-based organizations. They exist to convert non-believers to believers, and to strengthen existing believers (a form of conversion). Not as obvious is non-church organizations. But all organizations exist for a purpose, and that purpose holds an element of conversion to it. It may be to convert another organization’s customer to be this organization’s customer. It may be to convince this person to donate money to this organization over another one. It may be to buy this product over another product. The core of marketing is to convert people to buy a different product or use a different service. Where marketing fails though, is when it fails to convert potential customers, to actual customers. Enormous amounts of money are spent each year on failed marketing campaigns. Jesus did not want a failed marketing campaign; he wanted true, long-lasting change. And he achieved that through this mission.

Revolutionist

The revolutionist proclaims that the old world must be destroyed so that a new world can be built. Jesus declared this many times in his teachings. See Matthew 16.18-19, Mark 1:14-15, and John 2.19-20 for three examples of Jesus’ declarations to destroy the old kingdom and rebuild a new Kingdom in its place. Wenham advocates that the term “kingdom of God” could be intertwined with “revolution of God.”⁹ Jesus’ statement that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” may be the most outrageous statement ever made by a human. As C.S. Lewis noted in his famous trilemma argument, Jesus was either Lord, a liar or a lunatic, and nothing else could explain such a statement.¹⁰ Lewis’ viewpoint has been subject to debate, but does illustrate the revolutionary impact of Jesus’ words.¹¹

Management thought promotes the idea of disruptive innovation, a business concept attributed to Clayton Christensen.¹² Greater than anything ever done by businesses though, Jesus provided the most poignant “disruptive innovation” ever in his three years of ministry. He upended centuries of religious tradition through his actions

⁸ J.W. Shepard, *The Christ of the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939): 630.

⁹ D. Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983): 22-23.

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (London: Collins, 1952)

¹¹ For an in-depth study of the trilemma argument, see P. Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith: Essays in Christian apologetics*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988): 59.

¹² C. Christensen, *The Innovator’s Dilemma: When New Technologies Cause Great Firms to Fail*, (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1997).

and teachings. The Sermon on the Mount alone provides many examples of His disruptive innovations. For example, the Ten Commandments lists “Do not Murder” as a commandment.¹³ Jesus revolutionized that commandment by saying:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22).

Jesus similarly revolutionized other commandments, like commandments pertaining to adultery (Matthew 5:27-30), divorce (5:31-32), oaths (5:33-37), retaliation (5:38-42) and loving your enemy (5:43-48). He specifically commanded the crowds to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Jesus’ revolution was not through military power. Rather, He revolutionized the hearts of the people who were previously content to strive for barely meeting the threshold of the law. His revolution involved something much, much greater.

Utopian

Jesus started many parables with the words “The Kingdom of Heaven is like” and then described a metaphorical utopia illustrating the Kingdom of Heaven.¹⁴ Robbins notes that the “goal of a utopian response is to establish a new social organization that will eliminate evil.”¹⁵ Jesus did come to earth to establish this new envisioned utopia, although it was very different than what the people thought it would be. Collins and Porras describe the two essential and intertwined components of a successful vision as being an envisioned future and a core ideology.¹⁶ Jesus spent three years describing his core ideology and painted an envisioned future of what this utopia may consist of through his many teachings and parables.

His simple mention of heaven in the farewell discourse invokes the many descriptions of heaven He had given them over the previous three years of ministry. The utopia that Jesus painted was breathtaking and His use of metaphors to describe the seemingly undescrivable kingdom of heaven was seemingly intentional. To cite a few examples, He described the kingdom of heaven as being like planting good seed in a field,¹⁷ like a mustard seed that someone sowed in his field,¹⁸ like yeast that was mixed in with flour until it was leavened,¹⁹ like a treasure hidden in a field,²⁰ like a merchant in search of fine pearls,²¹ and like a net that was thrown into the sea and

¹³ Deuteronomy 5:17

¹⁴ For examples, see Matthew 13:24, 13:31, 13:33, 13:44, 13:45, 13:47 and many others throughout the Gospels.

¹⁵ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 74

¹⁶ J.C. Collins, J.C. and J.I. Porras, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*, (New York: HarperBusiness, 1997).

¹⁷ Matthew 13:24

¹⁸ Matthew 13:31

¹⁹ Matthew 13:33

²⁰ Matthew 13:44

²¹ Matthew 13:45

caught fish of every kind.²² These metaphors were rich and painted a tapestry of somewhere that people wanted to be. He tailored His message to their desire for something more than what they currently had. Likewise, followers want something more out of the mission a leader paints with them. It will never be as amazing as the kingdom of heaven obviously, but painting a rich picture of the future will enable people to want to buy into the mission with little coercion.

IV. HONOR, GUILT, AND RIGHTS CULTURES

Robbins describes the impact that cultural viewpoints of honor, guilt and rights have on interpreting scripture.²³ Additionally a look at the impact of Matthew 28 on cultural viewpoints of ethnic inclusiveness and honor gives us a glimpse into the true revolutionary impact of Jesus' words.

Ethnic Inclusiveness

Jesus routinely and strategically included minorities and women into this teachings and new Kingdom.²⁴ Women had few rights in Judean culture, but intriguingly, the Angel speaks to the women at the tomb, while the guards "shook and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:4). The Roman guards placed at the tomb fainted while the women stood strong. The angel then commissioned the women with a task: talk to the disciples and tell them that Jesus is alive. It is noteworthy that the women were given this task. In a culture that gave women very little power, women were the first evangelists for Jesus and began carrying out Jesus' mission before he spoke the official mission statement. The mission was so ingrained in their hearts that they acted it out without hesitation.

Jesus then met "them" (28:9). It is unclear who "them" refers to, but it seems to imply that Jesus met the women on the way to the disciples (see verse 28:7b). Again, Jesus emphasized the important place of women in his new Kingdom.

Matthew then writes that the eleven disciples worshipped Jesus (28:17). Jesus then stated his authority in order to clear up doubts when he stated that "all authority in heaven and on earth" was given to him (28:18). This authority was not limited to certain ethnicities, but rather, was over all people, regardless of race or gender. His final words reminded his followers that his death did not diminish his authority. Rather, his resurrection emphasized it.

Honor

Robbins notes that the first-century Mediterranean culture of Jesus' time was very focused on honor. Honor includes a claim to be worthy, as well as a cultural and social acknowledgement of that worth. Robbins further notes that *ascribed honor* is

²² Matthew 23:47

²³ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 76.

²⁴ For a further discussion of Matthew's description of this inclusiveness, see K.L. Sparks, "Gospel as Conquest: Mosaic Typology in Matthew 28:16-20," *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 68, (2006): 651-663

placed passively on a person, while *acquired honor* is actively sought out by a person.²⁵ Jesus had just allowed himself to be subjected to the most cruel and humiliating of deaths: crucifixion. That method of death in itself was dishonorable, but his honor was restored through his resurrection.

V. ESSENTIAL STRATEGIC ELEMENTS

Jesus' words illustrate a number of strategic elements for those attempting to implement a challenging and successful mission into their own organization.

Clarity and Brevity

There is no doubt whose mission this is. It is Jesus' mission and he has commissioned His disciples to carry it out. Lee notes that the Christian world sometimes confuses an individual mission with Jesus' mission. It is common for non-profit agencies to advocate "come join us in our mission" and then become proprietary about that individual mission.²⁶ This mission is not any one Christian's invention, but rather, one that all Christians are expected to carry. Jesus noted this when he declared that "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21).

Jesus sent his followers out into a nonlinear dynamic system where a small change on one variable will create changes in another and another, because all variables constantly interact with each other.²⁷ This is also known as the "butterfly effect". Jesus started a movement within that hearts of eleven men that has carried for 2000 years. A small, disruptive change catalyzed a revolution.

Jesus used a total of 61 words to summarize his Gospel. He chose not to preach a sermon and ramble on and on about why people should follow His mission. He stated the mission and left. He did not feel the need to explain every single word with case studies, examples and a 400-page policy manual. He gave the mission and expected the minute details to be figured out along the way.

Painting the Future

Jesus painted a picture and created a lens for his followers to hold their future actions up to. He knew that the road they would travel would be difficult. He narrowed the gospel to 61 words, and even further to "make disciples". Leavell notes that there is one dominant and controlling imperative in this passage: "make disciples." The other action words, "going", "baptizing", and "teaching" are dependent on this imperative. Jesus simplified the gospel to a few words that would provide oversight to the strategy development process of the emerging church. This would guide the future church's strategic development and would define the range of options they would consider.²⁸

²⁵ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts*, 76

²⁶ M. Lee, "The Five Marks of a Mission," *Global Connections Paper No.29*, (Autumn 2008).

²⁷ T.I. Sanders describes this phenomena in detail in *Strategic Thinking and the New Science*. New York: The Free Press, (1998): chapter 2.

²⁸ C.A. De Kluyver, and J.A. Pearce, *Strategy: A View from the Top (an Executive Perspective)*. (Upper Saddle River, NK: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006): 8.

One typical result of strategic planning is long-winded treatises describing the plan for the future. How many organizations have a strategic plan of 61 words that can be summarized in two? Jesus knew something about human nature and how we remember things. He knew that people will fill in the “how” details if they believe in the “what” and “why”. He previously taught them to think like He did, and now He was commissioning his disciples to go change the world. He painted a future for them where they would be constantly making disciples. They could picture this future, and that picture drove these men to die (or to the brink of death in John’s case) for this cause.

Positivity

Jesus also chose to focus on the positive and emphasized positive action statements. He could have listed many “do nots”. For example, do not fight with each other over petty issues of theology. Do not let pride get in the way of preaching the gospel. Do not sin. Instead he emphasized the positive. He told people how to be, not how not to be. This is sometimes hard for our legalistic brains to comprehend. We base much of our personal success on what we are not. I have not cheated on my wife, murdered anyone, robbed a bank, or hurt a child; therefore I am a good person. We like to read about scandals and leaders falling while pridefully reassuring ourselves that we are not *that* bad.

A mission should not include anything negative about what you are not. It does not need to compare to other people or organizations. Instead, it needs a focus on the positive aspects of moving forward with the eyes on the prize, not looking sideways or behind. We are to go into the world...and keep going and going and going (to quote the Energizer Bunny). We are not supposed to look back with regret, nor are we to worry about tomorrow. We are to go!

Outward Focus

Jesus focused on movement and on action words. He did not say “after you have spent four years developing and building your team, go”. He did not give us a list of internal processes to strengthen ourselves, our leaders and our followers. This outward focus is important to note. A mission statement needs to focus on the future and imply movement. It cannot read “when we are ready, we will go”. It needs to start the train moving and ask people to jump onto the already moving train.

Jesus’ commission in Matthew 28:18-19 follows a short, but interesting observation by Matthew. Matthew writes, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; *but some doubted*” (Matthew 28:16-17; emphasis added). After three years of watching Jesus minister to people. After three years of watching him do miracle after miracle after miracle. After seeing Jesus rise from the dead. Some of His disciples still doubted. This is mind blowing and couple be a paper unto itself. But Jesus chose not to rebuke the disciples that doubted Him still. He chose instead to focus them on His mission.

Organizations that focus too much on internal perfection can slowly implode. Organizations that move, and figure out the details along the way, seem to thrive. They

adapt to life and know they cannot predict every last detail of the future. But they know they are going. Katzenbach and Smith note that a demanding performance challenge tends to form a team and make it successful. Petty disagreements, internal politicking, and power struggles rarely happen on high performing teams, and a team without such a performance challenge rarely manages to even become a team. A challenging outward mission is necessary.²⁹

Encouragement

Jesus also chose to encourage His followers. 13 of the 61 words (21%) in the mission are direct reassurance and encouragement. Jesus has all the authority in the world but chose to encourage His followers in their mission. How many leaders take the time to encourage their followers? Imagine the results if a leader spent 20% of his or her work week (8 out of 40 hours) encouraging his or her followers? Gary Chapman wrote about the five love languages and one language he describes is “words of affirmation”. Chapman notes that all people need affirmation, but some people’s fuel for life is dependent on that affirmation.³⁰ In a mission that fueled a cultural revolution, the significance of encouragement must be noted in the mission that started it.

This theme of encouraging the followers of Jesus is ingrained throughout the Book. DeSilva writes that “Matthew also underscores the importance of Jesus as the Mediator of God’s presence in the church and in the world. The emphasis provides an especially valuable resource for the task of pastoral care (whether conducted by the ordained or laypeople).”³¹ Matthew further emphasizes Jesus’ role in caring for His followers by bookending the beginning and end with encouraging passages and interspersing the middle with additional passages that encourage His followers. Matthew 1:23 states that Jesus shall be called Emmanuel, which means “God with Us.” Knowing that His name literally means that He is with His followers is encouraging. Matthew 4:16 states that “the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.”

Many other passages in Matthew continue with the encouragement theme. Matthew 11:28-30 tells Jesus’ followers to “come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 18:20 states that “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Specifically to Peter, Jesus states “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus even uses an analogy of a mother hen in Matthew 23:37, when he states that “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers

²⁹ J.R. Katzenbach and D.K. Smith, *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High-Performance Organization*, (New York: HarperBusiness, 1999): 3.

³⁰ G. Chapman, *The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate*, (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2004).

³¹ D.A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004): 290

her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" The ministry of Jesus' disciples is not something carried on while he is absent. Rather, it is continuing the work He started. Jesus example of providing encouragement to His followers sets a great example for those aspiring to leadership. If your team is carrying out the same mission as you are, why would you not want to encourage them while they do so? To do otherwise would be working against your mission.

Leaders may find it easy to order around followers, but encouragement is a necessary part of any strategy. Encouragement may be hard to include in a written mission statement, but any mission needs to include support for those carrying it out. What happens during adversity? What happens to a follower that makes a mistake? Will support be cut for those carrying out the mission? Hostetler notes that "even martyrs, prisoners, and persecuted believers have experienced his presence, his peace and assurance in their most severe trials and experiences."³² Even those killed for carrying out this mission felt reassured that Jesus was still at their side while they were being tortured and killed (consider Stephen's story in Acts 6-7). Likewise, a leader's followers must know that they will be supported and encouraged amidst inevitable struggles. This is crucial to achieving a mission.

VI. CONCLUSION

Jesus' mission included every element a successful mission needs. It turned belief systems upside down and created a new status quo. Imagine a reporter asking Jesus today if he had any regrets about the mission he presented 2000 years ago.³³ What would Jesus say? Would He wish that He used more superfluous words? Would He add on amendments to clarify what He really meant? Would Jesus change the target audience of the mission? Would Jesus caution His disciples about the potential pitfalls or "what ifs" involved in carrying out the mission? Or would He comfortably say "my mission is perfect, but we still have a lot more work to do to fulfill it! Keep up the great work, and know that I am with you always, to the end of the age"? I think the latter.

About the Author

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³² J.J. Hostetler, *Matthew Explained: The Gospel Story of Jesus as King*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1988): 175.

³³ Illustration adapted from L. Ford, *Transforming Leadership: Jesus' Way of Creating Vision, Shaping Values & Empowering Change*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1991): 77.

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