

# Shalom 2: The Great Commission

'Shalom' is all about the Great Commission that Jesus gave us (Matth. 28:19). Too often we have seen Christians, and sometimes even whole denominations, with their own opinion about the assignment to bring the Good News into the world and make disciples for Jesus. Again that is caused by the Greek way of thinking in stead of the Hebrew way of thinking. In almost every translation, except in Hebrew, we find the word 'baptism' in Matth. 28:19: "... baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,..." (NIV). Almost automatically we kind of conclude that this 'baptizing' refers to baptism in water. Hebrew translations really speak about 'immersion'! Without a doubt many of you will reason that this has the same meaning. In a way it has, but let me try to clarify this within the context of the commission. The key lies in the difference between Greek and Hebrew thinking.

I am from Belgium and our Flemish culinary tradition is exceptional rich and heartily. That, combined with the exceptional quality of the calf meat we buy in our Village in Romania, guarantees success in the kitchen. Now, when we take a nice piece of calf meat and a bowl of red whine, we can do two things. We can 'dip' the meat in the whine and instantly remove it again. If we dry it with a kitchen towel we get the original piece of meat. Nothing has changed. If on the other hand we 'immerse' it in the whine and let it marinate during the night it most certainly will change. The whine penetrates in every pore of the meat and a change does happen. We still have the same piece of calf meat, but it looks different, it smells different and it tastes different. No matter how hard we rub with the kitchen towel, we will not be able to bring back its original condition. There is an everlasting change.

In English we use the word 'baptism', 'to baptize'. This is in fact originally not an English word, but a word that came from the Greek language. When the King James Version was written the translators were not allowed to translate the Greek word 'baptizo' into 'to immerse'. This has led to confusion concerning the concept of baptism. Baptising in water is an essential part of getting born-again (Acts 2:38), but we have to note that the disciples only baptized in the authority of Jesus. The only scripture that seems to speak of baptism in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit is Matth. 28:19. But the question is: does this scripture really speak about baptism in water?

The last words that Jesus spoke to his disciples before He returned to his Father, are the words that we recognize as the Great Commission. To think that these words would only point towards a one-off sacramental act seems quite unlikely. Throughout all the teachings of Jesus again and again we read that Jesus goes deeper than the natural visible world, and each time He points towards the deeper meaning of the facts. By example when he speaks about the Torah (the 'Law', or let's say the 'Instructions in Teaching') we learn that Murder is wrong, but also that ranting towards a brother and calling him 'a fool' is equal to murder to Him. His teaching is constantly aimed at perseverance and faithfulness in the long run, not for a short, one-time decision. Jesus' parables often contain the demand of continuous faithfulness: "The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of..." (Matth. 24:50), "The bridegroom was a long time in coming..." (Matth. 25:5), "After a long time the master of those servants

returned....” (Matth. 25:19). Jesus is not looking for keen servants but for faithful servants.

Let’s keep this in mind when we do some further research on the subject of the Great Commission. The Hebrew version of Matth. 28:19 can be of help in this matter:

“Therefore go and make disciples (Hebrew: talmidim) of all nations (people, race or ethnic groups) baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (NIV)

Immediately several differences come to the surface, this does not tell a different story than the traditional versions, but it does give a wider view on what Jesus says and certainly goes a lot deeper.

That people of all nations must spread the Gospel is pretty clear. God wants to bring people together in His family from every background, culture and race. This includes businessmen, politicians, factory workers and doctors as well as migrants, Muslims, Buddhists, and Gypsies. It is a pity that very often our churches have so little variety in positions, cultures and backgrounds.

In order to understand the expression ‘to immerse in the reality of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ we must first examine the word ‘disciple’. The Hebrew word for disciple is ‘talmid’. The twelve apostles of Jesus were called ‘talmidim’ (plural of talmid) as Jesus himself was called teacher or ‘rabbi’. The relationship between the rabbi and his talmidim cannot simply be characterized the same as a teacher towards his pupils. Again the Greek image we have of a ‘school’ blinds us for the full meaning of the relationship ‘rabbi-talmid’. A rabbi and his talmidim lived together, ate together, worked together and lived together. They shared their lives and this caused a close relationship through which experience and information was exchanged in both ways. The talmid learned of the experience of the rabbi and the rabbi was constantly challenged to give the best of himself. The prophet Samuel and his talmidim lived together this way and Jesus choose to train his disciples in the same way. This way of teaching is more intense than what we see in a school system in our western culture. The discipleship-training was not limited to schedules, but went on 24/7. The talmid was constantly immersed in the life, in the ‘reality’ of the rabbi. The goal in the first place was not pointed towards passing on knowledge but passing on a view of life and working towards a change in mentality. As a result of his education the talmid had not just gained more intellectual baggage, but he was also ‘marked’ by his rabbi. The enduring immersion in reality, the truth of the rabbi had brought an irreversible change in the life of the talmid. That is exactly what Jesus had done with his ‘talmidim’ and that was the commission that he gave them. Go into the world and immerse them in My Reality so they do not just speak about Me, they will really get to know Me, and as a result will be changed for the rest of their lives and become more and more like Me.

In some of the old manuscripts that we have of the gospels, the Father and the Holy Spirit are not mentioned in the Great Commission. Does this mean that we should only speak of Jesus towards unbelievers and leave the Father and the Holy Spirit out of evangelization? On the contrary! We cannot separate the three persons of God and treat them as different individuals. In evangelism and discipleship it is impossible

to speak about Jesus without including the Father and the Holy Spirit. Through His life Jesus showed us the Father and after his ascension he sent us the Holy Spirit as his replacement. If we would only knew the Great Commission in the version where Jesus alone was named, it would be impossible to put it into practice without giving Father and Holy Spirit the equal space. We cannot speak about the sacrifice of Jesus without knowing that the Father is also judge and that no one can be perfect in carrying out his laws. It would be pretty heartless to have the sinless life of Jesus as a standard of living and not having the hope of the Holy Spirit in us to help us change according to Jesus' image.

However, a lot of churches and communities have their 'speciality'. Some emphasize on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus thus sticking to the stories where Someone long ago lived far away... This will soon lead to an irrelevant gospel that has little feeling with daily life in the western society. Others emphasize on the holiness of the Father and how one should live as a child of God. If this is taken apart from the work of the Son and the Holy Spirit, things will soon go down to legalism (sticking to laws). Others emphasize on the freedom that we have in the Holy Spirit. However, if this freedom is not checked with the Word (Jesus), and when the fear of the Lord (Father) is absent, it usually degenerates to 'lawlessness'. The wonderful relationship we can have with God then becomes no more than an emotional binding where the 'experience' is important. Although each of these emphases is not wrong in itself, the danger is immaturity and a lack of balance. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable and should thus be part of our evangelism and discipleship. If we do not see the interaction and the unity, we miss the core of the message.

In closing we want to think about the word 'reality'. In most translations the word 'name' is used here. The Greek word 'onoma' indeed means 'name', but literally as well as metaphorically speaking. Other possible translations are 'authority' and 'character'. Out of the context of Jesus' concept of discipleship, the long-term immersion in the life and the truth of Himself, it seems better to use the translation 'character', or indeed 'reality'. It is interesting to know that in Hebrew the word 'truthful' and 'reality' are in fact the same word (amiti). So we could read: "and immerse them in my Truth". Reality, character and truth: it all tells us so much more than the word 'name'. This is important, it goes way deeper! It's like the translators of the bible wanted to stay on the safe side and chose to use the most impartial word. What a pity! This is about the Character, the Truth and the Reality of God and nothing less!

The Great Commission, as we read it in the Hebrew version, keeps perfect balance between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of the three persons of the divinity gets equal attention. It doesn't point to the brief act of the baptism in water, but to a long-term process in walking with God in order to get a life-changing experience in our lives. The commission is: immerse them in the reality of God!