

STUDENTS IN MISSIONS

by Kevin Little

Matt 28:18-20

18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 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,

20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

"The evangelization of the world in this generation" This bold and zealous watchword characterized and motivated the Student Volunteer Movement, the most potent student mobilizers in all of history. From its outset the SVM called students to commit their lives, first, to the person and lordship of Christ, then, to taking the gospel of Christ to the unevangelized portions of the world. Students, looking for a cause worth giving their lives to and moved by the Holy Spirit, committed themselves in unprecedented droves to the evangelization of the world in their generation. At one point of its history, 75% of all female missionaries and 70% of all male missionaries were volunteers, who had been called to this pursuit by the SVM. In its history, the SVM was responsible for over 20,000 missionaries on the field, not committed to going but on the field. 20,000 college students had actually abandoned their dreams for the adventure of following Christ's heart to the nations. Four times this number, over 80,000, remained at home, supporting their fellow volunteers as well as increasing missions education.

SMALL BEGINNINGS

This mobilization effort began in 1886 as a result of a random outpouring of God's Spirit at a summer conference in Mt Hermon, New Hampshire. The focus of the conference, led by D. L. Moody, was evangelism and Bible study, not missions, but the hearts of Luther Wishard, the organizer of the conference, and Robert Wilder, a senior from Princeton, longed for a nationwide movement of God's Spirit in the production of missionary zeal. At the beginning of the conference, Wilder pulled together eighteen other men who had committed themselves to going to the unevangelized portions of the world for daily prayer and conversation on the topic of world missions.

By the end of the conference, this small group of missionary zealots grew to one hundred individuals, nearly half those in attendance. Although Wilder was only

responsible for drawing only eight or nine of these men, multiplication occurred in an amazing fashion as men recently stirred by the flames of God's love for all men quickly spread that flame to others around them. Each of these men signed a declaration that read, *"We, the undersigned, declare ourselves willing and desirous, God permitting, to go to the unevangelized portions of the world."* From the momentum of this event arose the Student Volunteer Movement.

CATCHING FIRE

Desiring to promote and conserve the missionary zeal that took root at the Mt. Hermon conference, Robert Wilder, accompanied by a fellow Princeton grad, toured the universities of the United States sharing the story of Mt. Hermon as well as challenging students to join them in their declaration. In the 1886-87 academic year alone, over 1,500 men and women signed the declaration. Once again, the power of multiplication was evident, for during the second year following Mt. Hermon, without the aid of a second deputation, the number of volunteers who had signed the declaration increased from around 2,000 to 3,000 during the 1887-88 academic year. God was moving the hearts of college students to give up their petty crusades and to lay down their lives for God's pursuit of the lost.

Those who toured the campuses of the United States for the SVM, beginning with Wilder, presented a message that confronted complacency and excuses and that gave students a goal to which they could cling and pursue. The SVM advocates put the burden of proof on the students who wished to stay rather than those eager to go. Robert Speer, the advocate that followed Wilder, presented it best when he used an allegory of a drowning man. The one who sees the drowning man must explain why he stays on the bank, not why he dives into the river. In the world-wide cause of Christ, a similar situation exists. These students were called by Christ to go and make disciples of all nations;" however, they lived in a nation that had been disciplined, while other nations had not yet been disciplined; therefore, the student who chose to stay in his disciplined nation was forced to explain why the Lord had called him to that path, while the student who chose to sign the declaration and to go was simply obeying the commands of Christ.

This argument caused men to confront the commands of Christ and the role they would play in the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Also, the SVM advocates, after its development, called these students to a goal that was clearly and simply stated. This gave students a north star to pursue. **"The evangelization of the world in this generation"** became the watchword of the SVM. Students responded to the challenge of these advocates because they knew what they were giving their lives to ("the evangelization of the world in this generation") and they knew why (Christ commanded them to go to those who had not yet heard).

CONCLUSION

Today, these conditions remain. Christ's command to go and make disciples has lost no authority during these one hundred years. His command remains binding upon his people, for all the nations have yet to be reached and discipled. For this reason, the burden of proof once again falls on those who would choose to stay in an evangelized nation. How does your life fulfill Christ's Great Commission? This is the question you must answer whether you stay or go. At no point in history has the watchword of the SVM been nearer to fulfillment and within the grasp of a generation. We, like the students of the past, are called to make the evangelization of the world in this generation our heart cry and the purpose of our life, to the glory of God.

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