

7-1-2013

The Gathering of the Saints: Noun or Verb?

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Recommended Citation

Priddy, K. E. (2013). The Gathering of the Saints: Noun or Verb?. *Great Commission Research Journal*, 5(1), 83-98. Retrieved from <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/gcrj/vol5/iss1/9>

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abstract

This paper examines the question: Who are the saints? In the Old Testament the saints are the people of God, the nation of Israel, specifically those who have genuine faith and are true believers. In the New Testament the saints are the church, those who have been regenerated through the working of the Holy Spirit to be more than members of the visible church, but members of the eternal invisible church as well. In modern times we often speak of the “gathering of the saints.” Both noun and verb uses are included in Scripture and they are essentially distinguished by whether or not an Old Testament gathering or a New Testament gathering is in view. This investigation notes the difference and why the difference is important.

the old testament gathering

In the Old Testament, two Hebrew words are used that refer to the gathering of the saints, a noun form. The first of these words is *miqra*, referring to a public meeting of something or someone who is called out, an assembly or a gathering, and as in the case of Scripture, a gathering of the saints. In Exodus 12:16, a summons goes

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out to the people of Israel, “On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly, and on the seventh day a holy assembly. No work shall be done on those days. But what everyone needs to eat, that alone may be prepared by you.” This Old Testament assembly, or *miqra*, was a gathering (noun) of the saints.

The second of these words is *qahal*, also referring to an assembly, a congregation, a company, a gathering, and, again, in the case of Scripture, a gathering of the saints. Nehemiah chastised God’s people, the saints, in Nehemiah 5:13 with, “I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, ‘So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So may he be shaken out and emptied.’ And all the assembly said ‘Amen’ and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised.” This is another example of an Old Testament assembly, or *qahal*, a gathering (noun) of the saints.

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the new testament gathering

While the original manuscripts of the Old Testament were composed in Hebrew, the New Testament autographs were written in Greek. An interesting shift takes place with the change of original language and the quantum leap from pre-Incarnation to post-Incarnation. Horton informs, “The New Testament typically substitutes [the Greek word] *ekklesia* (from the Hebrew *qahal*, ‘assembly’ or ‘gathering’) for the people of God.”¹ *Ekklesia* is translated into English as *church*, as in the words of Jesus, “I will build my church,” His *ekklesia*.

The gathering of the saints in the New Testament shifts from *gathering* as a noun to *gathering* as a verb. The gathering is not a place but an action. Though the Old Testament carries tremendous theological and historical value, we are living in the New Testament era, the first of the last days as ushered in by the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The twenty-first century *ekklesia* must be about the activity, the fulfilling of the mandate, of gathering the saints.

gathering the saints through time

What is the point of time? Why did God create time, space, and people? God has a plan to raise a family, an eternal family, out of the human beings that He has created. He has chosen to do this over time. God has suspended a timeline inside of eternity that extends from Genesis to Revelation, a timeline for the unfolding of

¹ Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 719.

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redemptive history. As recorded in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God created man in His own image, male and female (Gen. 1:27). He blessed them and commanded them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:28). In Revelation, the last book in the Bible, we read, “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

The question concerning the gathering of the saints is this: How do we get from the *multiply* of Genesis to the *multitude* of Revelation? Answer: God is constantly gathering the saints. How? He is gathering the saints through the redemptive work of God the Son through the power of God the Spirit. Jesus is the catalyst, sent on a mission by God the Father to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). A word that captures the heart of seeking and saving is the word *gathering*, in this case, gathering the lost. Who are the lost? The lost are the saints, those whose names were recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life before the foundations of the world (Rev. 13:8). Until they are gathered, they are lost, and it is they whom Jesus was sent to seek and to save.

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This is the mission of Jesus Christ, His objective. Coleman observes, “His life was ordered by His objective. Everything He did and said was a part of the whole pattern. It had significance because it contributed to the ultimate purpose of His life in redeeming the world for God. This was the motivating vision governing His behavior. His steps were ordered by it. Mark it well. Not for one moment did Jesus lose sight of His goal.”²

Jesus had His mission and His objective, but Jesus left the planet. The Holy Spirit was sent on the Day of Pentecost to empower the disciples to keep the flame, to continue the mission that Jesus had started. Remarkably, though utterly ordinary, these men would do extraordinary things through the power of the Spirit. Coleman explains, “By His power the disciples were promised the very ability to do the works of their Lord (John 14:2). In this light, evangelism was not interpreted as a human undertaking at all, but a divine project which had been going on from the beginning and would continue until God’s purpose was fulfilled. It was altogether the Spirit’s work. All the disciples were asked to do was to let the Spirit have complete charge of their lives.”³

² Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1964), 18.

³ *Ibid.*, 66–67.

So the disciples had their mission, their objective, but then they were gone, dying at various times throughout the first century. However, the mission of Jesus, the mission of the disciples, did not and will not die. As Jesus and the disciples were sent, so the New Testament church is sent. Being fruitful and multiplying, first a cultural mandate, is now a spiritual mandate as many will be physically born throughout time, and some will be spiritually born again as the saints are gathered by and into the church, the *ekklesia*. Horton remarks, “As we have seen, the cultural mandate and the Great Commission are distinct. In this era of redemptive history, cultural activity is common, not holy; it is affirmed, preserved, and furthered through God’s common grace, but not redemptive. The church, on the other hand, is the embassy of the kingdom of heaven, sent to the nations with the good news.”⁴ The saints are going to be gathered. Nothing can prevent this gathering, for it is the will and purpose of God.

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the expectation of gathering the saints

Coleman declares, “Jesus intended for the disciples to produce His likeness in and through the Church being gathered out of the world.”⁵ The church, indeed, is an intended gathering. For this intended gathering to be completed, gatherers were and are needed. Paul speaks of running the race and, in fact, finishing the race (2 Tim. 4:6). I suggest that Paul finished his leg of the race. The gathering of the saints is an ongoing relay race that will be run throughout time, one saint passing the baton to another until the history of redemption is completed.

Jesus took care that the disciples would be ready to run when He passed the baton to them. Coleman explains, “Through this manner of personal demonstration, every aspect of Jesus’ personal discipline of life was bequeathed to His disciples, but what perhaps was most important in view of His ultimate purpose was that all the while He was teaching them how to win souls.”⁶

The disciples not only inherited eternal life, but they also inherited the responsibility of seeking and saving the lost. To be clear, it was not in their power to regenerate the lost, but it was in their power to pray for God, through His Spirit, to regenerate the lost and use them as gatherers. Packer concludes, “In prayer, then (and the Christian is at his sanest and wisest when he prays), you *know* that it is God who saves men; you *know* that what makes men turn to God is God’s own gracious work of drawing them to Himself; and the content of your prayers is

⁴ Horton, 719.

⁵ Coleman, 102.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

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determined by this knowledge, no less than by giving thanks for your conversion, you acknowledge and confess the sovereignty of God's grace."⁷

The baton of gathering the saints would pass from Jesus to the disciples, but not before He prayed for them. This prayer is recorded in John 17:6–19, concluding with, “As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:18–19). Horton observes, “In his Great Commission, Jesus commanded the disciples to take this message to everyone, baptizing and teaching in his name (Mt. 28:18–20), and at Pentecost they were empowered as witnesses to proclaim that which they had seen and heard.”⁸

Since the plan of God is for the baton to be passed from one generation of saints to another, Jesus prays further for all generations of saints that will follow that first generation, seen in John 17:20–26. He prays in part, “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–21). Coleman warns, “The world is desperately seeking someone to follow. That they will follow someone is certain, but will he be a man who knows the way of Christ, or will he be one like themselves leading them only on into greater darkness? This is the decisive question of our plan of life. The relevance of all that we do waits upon its verdict, and in turn, the destiny of the multitudes hangs in the balance.”⁹

What stands in the way of our meeting these great expectations? Ephesians 2 reveals a three-party conspiracy that works against us in fulfilling the plan and purpose of God. The first conspirator listed there is the “course of this world,” the distractions, the demands, the wealth, and the pleasures of our culture that so easily become idols. The second conspirator is identified as the “prince of the power of the air,” better known as the Devil. No doubt, he is a strong adversary. The third conspirator, and the most insidious of all, is described as the “passions of our flesh,” in other words, ourselves (Eph. 2:1–3). We conspire against our own holiness and usefulness by living in the flesh rather than living in the Spirit. Coleman writes, “One can not help being impressed with the realistic way that Jesus never let His disciples underestimate the strength of the enemy, nor the natural resistance of men to His redeeming Gospel.”¹⁰ The influence of culture and the power of the Devil, though, will not hold us back, provided we discipline

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⁷ J.I. Packer, *Evangelism & The Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 15–16.

⁸ Horton, 20–21.

⁹ Coleman, 126.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

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ourselves to life in the Spirit. To do so, however, challenges us to work against the grain of human nature and to work against the schemes of the enemy.

Bosch casts a disturbing shadow over our zeal to fulfill God's plan and purpose in us with a historical examination of human nature. He exhorts,

I have suggested that Jesus had no intention of founding a new religion. Those who followed him were given no name to distinguish them from other groups, no creed of their own, no rite which revealed their distinctive group character, no geographical center from which they would operate (Schweizer 1971:42; Goppelt 1981:208). The twelve were to be the vanguard of all Israel and, beyond Israel, by implication, of the whole ecumene. The community around Jesus was to function as a kind of *pars pro toto*, a community for the sake of all others, a model for others to emulate and be challenged by. Never, however, was this community to sever itself from others.

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This high level of calling was, however, not maintained for long. Already at a very early stage Christians tended to be more aware of what distinguished them from others than of their calling and responsibility toward those others. Their survival as a separate religious group, rather than their commitment to the reign of God, began to preoccupy them. In the words of Alfred Loisy (19976:166), 'Jesus foretold the kingdom and it was the Church that came.' In the course of time the Jesus community simply became a new religion, Christianity, a new principle of division among humankind. And so it has remained to this day."¹¹

Are we going to be kingdom people, or are we going to be religious people? Are we going to dive into faith sacrificially, or are we going to dabble with faith superficially? Are we going to be among the workers who gather the harvest, or are we going to leave the heavy lifting to someone else? Horton proclaims, "There is a church because there is one who stood in his resurrected flesh and declared, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations . . .'" (Mt. 28:18–19).¹² Are we going to stand with Him? Are we going to go?

the biblical mandate that compels us to gather the saints

Every page of Scripture is about redemption in one way or another, but there are six particular passages of Scripture that speak to the vision of God to raise a family—the family of God, the church, the *ekklesia*.

¹¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 50.

¹² Horton, 521.

1. the great promise of gathering the saints—matthew 16:13–18

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’”

The church, the body of Christ, will be built, and Jesus Himself will build it. Of that we can be certain. This text reveals the method by which this building will take place. God the Father, through God the Spirit, will reveal that God the Son is the Christ, the Son of the living God. In that sense, Peter might be seen here as the first Christian convert through a revelation and regeneration that will be the foundation of the church. Every time a man, a woman, or a child comes to faith in Jesus through regeneration, the family of God will grow, the living house of God will expand by one living stone with Jesus as the Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4–7). It is interesting to note the rock and stone imagery used throughout the epistles of Peter.

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God has a vision of a church that proclaims salvation through the person of Jesus Christ. The challenge for a church is to determine how to get this proclamation to the ears of the lost in its community. The promise is that Jesus will build His church as the saints are gathered, one living stone at a time.

2. the great commandment to gather the saints—matthew 22:34–40

“But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’”

The Great Commandment calls the believer to two dimensions of love: vertical love for God and horizontal love for people. Rare is the church that commits to both. In general, the conservative church goes vertical, while the liberal church goes horizontal. Both fail to live out the Great Commandment, while both consider themselves fully compliant with, if not fully demonstrating, this two-dimensional love. The vertical church considers itself to be serving people by calling them to worship the living and true God. It reasons that man cannot live by

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bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Mt. 4:4). True, but it's difficult to absorb the truth of Scripture while one's stomach is growling. The horizontal church considers itself to be serving God by meeting the social needs of people. True, they also think, man does not live by bread alone, but man does need to eat. On a basic level that's fine, but if true, spiritual redemptive ministry is not brought into the equation, how is this different than any other form of humanistic social agency?

Packer posits, "There are, in fact, two motives that should spur us constantly to evangelize. The first is love to God and concern for His glory; the second is love to man and concern for his welfare."¹³ What is the connection between evangelism, going out to gather the saints, and the Great Commandment? If we love God, we will love Him by loving what He loves. He loves people (the crown of His Creation), and He loves His family (those saints whom He is calling to be His own forever). If we love people, we will not rest until each one has heard the saving message of Jesus Christ, the Gospel, for it is only through Him that people will inherit eternal life (John 10:9; 14:6).

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Concerning love, Packer informs, "If you love someone, you are constantly trying to think out what is the best you can do for him, and how best you can please him, and it is your pleasure to give him pleasure by the things you devise for him."¹⁴ What is the best we can do for God? We can love His people by our actions, not simply by our intentions. What is the best we can do for people? We can love people by engaging them where they are, meeting their earthly needs, and tending to their eternal souls.

God has a vision of a church that loves Him and loves people and proves that love in its commitment of time, energy, resources, care, and focus. The challenge for a church is to determine how it will prove this love while serving God and serving the people of its community. It is through this love that the saints will be gathered, and God will be glorified.

3. the great commission to gather the saints—matthew 28:18–20

"And Jesus came and said to them, '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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

¹³ Packer, 73.

¹⁴ Ibid., 78–79.

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All Scripture holds supreme authority because it is the Word of God, and Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that authority as He is the Living Word, the Word become flesh. Post-resurrection, He explains to His disciples that all authority in heaven and earth, all of the possible authority that exists anywhere, has been given to Him. This is exponential authority as the One who is the embodiment of all authority is given all authority—authority to the power of authority, or A^2 if you will. In that colossal authority, He authorizes His disciples, then and now, to make disciples. How are they to do this? They will complete this mission by going, baptizing, and teaching.

Consider the Greek grammar of this passage. Coleman observes, “Their mission is emphasized even more when the Greek text of the passage is studied, and it is seen that the words ‘go,’ ‘baptize,’ and ‘teach’ are all participles which derive their force from the one controlling verb ‘make disciples.’”¹⁵ Dukes acknowledges this grammatical insight in a slightly different formulation with, “Jesus’ last words were to His followers, and His message was clear—as you are going, make disciples.”¹⁶ We are to make disciples by going, we are to make disciples by baptizing, and we are to make disciples by teaching. This is a holistic work that requires that we be in relationship with people over time as, by the grace of God, we minister with people from conversion to maturity. McIntosh and Martin instruct, “A well-developed evangelism strategy moves people from observer to hearer to believer to learner.”¹⁷

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Sadly, many, if not most, churches that dot the American evangelical landscape have stripped the Great Commission of its depth and breadth. How so? Church leaders fail to go in the power of the authority of Christ, ministering in the flesh. Church leaders fail to go at all. Church leaders fail to evangelize, and, therefore, they fail to baptize. Church leaders fail to teach obedience to the commands of Christ and settle for teaching doctrine, apparently more concerned with Christian *education* than Christian *living*.

God has a vision of a church that goes in the awesome authority of Christ to make disciples who make disciples, going to them, baptizing them as they come to Christ through conversion, and teaching them how to live in Christ by obedience to His Word. The challenge for a church is to determine how it will go, baptize, and teach in this authority as it reaches the people of its community, keenly aware of the presence of Christ that is promised in His commission. The church that makes such a commitment and follows through will gather the saints.

¹⁵ Coleman, 108.

¹⁶ Jason C. Dukes, *Live Sent: You Are a Letter* (Birmingham, AL: New Hope Publishers, 2011), 127.

¹⁷ Gary McIntosh and Glen Martin, *Finding Them, Keeping Them: Effective Strategies for Evangelism and Assimilation in the Local Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1992), 53.

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Jesus was not asking for volunteers any more than God was asking Isaiah to volunteer for service as he stood before God on His throne in Isaiah 6. This is an assignment that specifies what the disciples will do and where they will do it. What are they going to do as they go and make disciples? They are going to be His witnesses. As such, what testimony will they give? To answer that question is first to consider what they have witnessed in Jesus. They have seen and heard how He lived each and every day of His earthly ministry, what He taught, the miracles He performed, His interaction with people He encountered along the way, and His willing submission to the Roman and Jewish authorities that confronted Him during His final week leading up to the cross. They have seen and heard His private disciplines and discussions with them, His transfiguration, and His death on a cross. Now they are seeing the resurrected Christ who death could not hold, who emerged from the grave to meet them once again in Galilee. They are about to see Him ascend into heaven. It is He and all that He is and does that will be the focus of their witnessing and their eyewitness testimony to the love, grace, mercy, power, holiness, person, and work of God’s only Son.

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Though entrusted to them, their effectiveness in gathering the saints will not be left in their hands. Packer remarks, “. . . The power that saves is not in the instrument: it is in the hand of the One who uses the instrument.”¹⁸ They will be His instruments of witness, and their testimony will be empowered by the promised Holy Spirit who would descend on them in the days to come. They will be driven by the Word of God, including the teaching of the prophets and everything they have seen, heard, and learned in Jesus, the Living Word. These were ordinary men, but they served a unique and extraordinary Lord. It is His story that they will tell as they make disciples.

Following Christ’s ascension, the Holy Spirit came to them on the Day of Pentecost. Peter preached the first Christian sermon, expositing the writings of the prophets in proving that Jesus is both Lord and Savior. Acts 2 informs that some three thousand were added to the church that day as the New Testament gathering of the saints began to explode. This first church was a mobilized church. McIntosh and Martin point out, “The early church wasn’t stagnant. The early church wasn’t dull. It was on fire! It made its presence felt in its community in three ways. First, it

¹⁸ Packer, 27.

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was present in the normal network of society. Second, they were present in ministry to the physical needs of people. Third, the early Christians were present in the spiritual battle for people's souls."¹⁹

The church would establish its witness in Jerusalem, and then would expand in ever-widening circles to Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth. This global conquest would far outlive the original disciples, but Jesus had modeled the passing of the baton to set the stage for global saturation of the Gospel. Coleman observes, "Surely if the pattern of Jesus at this point means anything at all it teaches that the first duty of an evangelist is to see to it that a foundation has been laid in the beginning upon which can be built an effective and continuing evangelistic ministry to the multitudes."²⁰ Ultimately, this multitude would grow into being the multitude that is pictured in Revelation 7 as too numerous to count.

As this baton has been passed from generation to generation, it has come to us who are alive as witnesses today. We must run our leg of the race, continuing to gather the saints. In the church language of today, before being gathered, saints are among the *unchurched*. The call to the unchurched is not to become members of our churches per se, but members of the family of God, the true *ekklesia*. Barna encourages, "As we ponder ways to approach the unchurched people we know, let's think about the nature of our own commitments to God. Our offer to the unchurched should not be 'Come and join an organization' or 'Come and hang out with our nice group of people.' The offer should be 'You, too, can have a relationship with God that will restore in you the same thing that we experience and that we have become.' Jesus expressed this when He said to His disciples, 'Follow Me' (Matt. 19:21). What the unchurched must do is follow Jesus—completely, unashamedly, joyfully, willingly, and longingly. If that is going to happen, we who already know Jesus must show them the way."²¹ That's what it means to be His witnesses.

God has a vision of a church that is empowered by the Holy Spirit and that bears witness to Jesus Christ here, there, and everywhere. The challenge for a church is to determine how that witness will be communicated in word and deed to the lost, the unchurched. The church that effectively bears this witness will effectively gather the saints.

¹⁹ McIntosh and Martin, 23–25.

²⁰ Coleman, 33.

²¹ George Barna, *Grow Your Church from the Outside In: Understanding the Unchurched and How to Reach Them* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2002), 17.

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

This is one of those statements in Scripture that has the power to stand alone with no context whatsoever but the statement itself. If we received this statement in such a manner, we could completely understand what is being said about the mission of Jesus Christ. However, this statement is made in a context, that of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus. Jesus was in en route to the cross in Jerusalem, and it would have been easy in His humanity to miss this small man who climbed a tree to see Him. Jesus not only saw Him, but he also explained that He had to stay at the home of Zacchaeus that day. Amazing! Didn’t Jesus have more important things to be thinking about with the cross and paying the penalty for the sins of mankind before Him? Why this interruption, this detour to the home of a despised tax collector?

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As it turns out, this is no interruption, no detour, for Zacchaeus is the very reason that Jesus is going to the cross. Zacchaeus is lost, and Jesus came to seek and to save Zacchaeus. On that day, Zacchaeus was gathered as a saint, referred to in this text as a son of Abraham. Hendriksen expounds, “Does this not mean emancipation from the greatest evil and being placed in possession of the greatest good? Does it not mean ‘everlasting life?’ ‘ Today Jesus had called the chief publican out of that tree and had with blessing entered his home. Today, therefore, the great spiritual miracle had taken place. The Great Shepherd had found his sheep . . . When Jesus now declares that Zacchaeus is indeed a son of Abraham, he is, of course, not merely declaring that the chief publican is a physical descendant of the arch-patriarch. He is using ‘son of Abraham’ in a spiritual sense.”²²

God has a vision of a church that joins Jesus on His search and rescue mission to seek and to save the lost. The challenge for a church is to determine how it will spiritually and strategically fulfill that commitment. The church that makes seeking and saving its priority will gather the saints.

6. the great multiplication in gathering the sheep—matthew 24:14

“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.”

Matthew 24:14 is a picture of a completed Great Commission when the Gospel has been proclaimed to all nations. France identifies the calling, “Jesus’ universal Lordship now demands a universal mission. The restriction of the disciples’

²² William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel of Luke* (New Testament Commentary), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978), 857.

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mission to Israel alone in Matthew 10:4–5 can now be lifted, for the kingdom of the Son of man as described in Daniel 7:14 requires *disciples of all nations*.²³ Grudem adds, “This evangelistic work of declaring the gospel is the primary ministry that the church has toward the world.”²⁴

God is the God of time, and all things will come to fruition in His time. We can neither accelerate nor decelerate the movement of time, but we can be faithful in our time. We can give ourselves to the priority of Gospel declaration throughout the world, beginning with the neighborhoods that our churches call home. God has a vision of a church that proclaims this Gospel as a testimony to the nations, near and far. The challenge for a church is to determine how the priority of such a commitment will be played out in the nuts and bolts of its ministry and in the prayers and actions of its people. The church that makes such a commitment and follows through gathers the saints.

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the gathering of the harvest

Jesus taught that prayers offered in His name, prayers that are in keeping with the will of God, will be answered, that we will receive what is requested, that we will find what we seek, and that the doors upon which we knock will be opened. The key is to pray in accordance with the will of God. In a rare account in Scripture, Jesus tells us exactly what to ask in prayer, a clear indication that this prayer would undoubtedly be offered in His name and according to the will of God. That account is found in Matthew 9:35–38:

“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he 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 pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.’”

This text reveals much about the gathering of the saints. First, Jesus proclaimed the Gospel. Second, He took the Gospel near and far. Third, He was moved by the spiritual helplessness of the people. Fourth, the harvest of saints to be gathered was plentiful. Fifth, there was a labor shortage. Sixth, He commanded praying to God for laborers who would go and gather the harvest, laborers who

²³ R.T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 413.

²⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 868.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 5, Iss. 1 [2013], Art. 9 would be fruitful and multiply. These are prayers that will surely be answered as Jesus Himself commanded that they be prayed.

What does Jesus have in view? Is He suggesting that the disciples objectively pray that God would recruit laborers from among His people that will be willing to go and gather the harvest, or is He exhorting His disciples to pray subjectively that God will bless their efforts as they go and gather the harvest? There is no mystery here. They and we are called to go in to the plentiful harvest and gather the saints. To fail to do so is to be disobedient. Coleman remarks, “As surely as they were participants in His life, even so they would bear His fruit (John 15:5, 8), and furthermore, their fruit would remain (John 15:16). A barren Christian is a contradiction. A tree is known by its fruit.”²⁵

One truth is inescapable: saints that have been gathered are to gather the saints. The gathered saints must commit, must be trained, and must be mobilized. McIntosh and Martin speak of “production evangelism,” noting, “This component of evangelism takes to heart the need to train church members so that they become witnesses for Christ. We must answer, ‘How are we helping people to learn to share their faith?’”²⁶ It is now our turn to go into the harvest, both collectively as the church and personally as individuals. Packer explains, “But the commission to publish the gospel and make disciples was never confined to the apostles. Nor is it now confined to the Church’s ministers. It is a commission that rests upon the whole Church collectively, and therefore upon each Christian individually.”²⁷

the sin problem

Sin is the very reason that Jesus died on the cross. He died as the penalty for sin to assuage our guilt and to make atonement on our behalf. In dealing with our sin problem, Jesus made it possible for us to be gathered as saints. Ironically, sin remains a problem in the gathering of the saints. Why? Sin remains a problem because most people, especially in twenty-first century America, do not see sin as a problem. How can one deal with his problem with sin if he does not see his sin as a problem? In fact, many do not see their sin at all.

We live in a society—a culture—that is committed to a skewed idea of tolerance. Sin is not an issue for many, as tolerance means that almost anything goes. We judge ourselves horizontally and reason that we are nowhere near the

²⁵ Coleman, 107.

²⁶ McIntosh and Martin, 15.

²⁷ Packer, 45.

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worst that humanity has to offer. It is one thing for secular culture to hold such a view, but it seems that this view is often held among Christians, as well. Sproul laments, “Let me mention parenthetically that the idea of mankind’s basic goodness is a cardinal tenet of humanistic philosophy. It also pervades American evangelicalism if recent polls are at all accurate. In a Gallup Poll, the overwhelming majority of professing evangelicals indicated their agreement with the proposition that people are ‘basically good.’”²⁸ In other words, there is no sin problem from a human, horizontal point of view.

According to Scripture, we are not to measure ourselves horizontally against each other. We are to measure ourselves vertically against the holiness of God. Jesus proclaims, “You must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). Once we come to grips with this reality, we recognize our sin problem. This is the starting point of being gathered as a saint and in gathering others once we are in the faith and sent back into the harvest.

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The Sin Solution

A solution for sin is found in the meritorious work of our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s not that sin does not matter anymore; rather, it’s that our sin is brought before the Lord as we are convicted, as we confess, as we are forgiven, and as we are brought into a right relationship with our holy God. Packer explains,

What are the signs of true conviction of sin?

1. Conviction of sin is essentially an awareness of *a wrong relationship with God*.
2. Conviction of sin always includes conviction of *sins*: a sense of guilt for particular wrongs done in the sight of God.
3. Conviction of sin always includes conviction of *sinfulness*: a sense of one’s corruption and perversity in God’s sight, and one’s consequent need of what Ezekiel called a “new heart,” and . . . a moral re-creation.²⁹

The central theme of the Gospel, the Good News, is that, though we are sinners, we can have eternal life through Christ. We do not need to die in our sin, but we can live in our Savior. Any saint that is gathered comes to understand this liberating truth, and any saint that seeks to gather others must deliver this truth as the central principle of the gathering message. Saints cannot come to Christ and cannot be gathered into the family until they come face to face with their sin and

²⁸ R.C. Sproul, *What Is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

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seek forgiveness through faith in our loving Lord Jesus Christ. There simply is no other way. We have a sin problem, but Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the sin solution.

conclusion: centripetal vs. centrifugal

In the New Testament era, the gathering of the saints is an aggressive action and not a building, a location, or a worship service. The gathering of the saints in the Old Testament was just that, and there is a stark contrast between the Old Testament Hebrew gathering and New Testament Christian gathering. Horton makes this distinction clear: “In its typological-theocratic form, Israel was a centripetal community, separated from the nations; in its fulfillment, it becomes a centrifugal community, sent out from the Holy of Holies, through the Holy Place, out to the court of the Gentiles. This is the force of Christ’s Great Commission.”³⁰

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The kingdom of God will come; the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven when the second *sending* of Christ establishes a new heaven and a new earth. Horton anticipates, “Jesus inaugurated the kingdom that Paul and the other apostles declared. It is not a kingdom that arises from any place or program on earth, but descends from heaven. Where the King is present, his kingdom is present also. Yet he was present in weakness and humility, for us and for our salvation. When he comes in glory, his kingdom will be glorious in power and might.”³¹ This will occur when the Gospel has been proclaimed as a testimony to the nations, when every person listed in the Lamb’s Book of Life has been found, when every saint has been gathered.

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³⁰ Horton, 986.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 547.