

**Beginning at the End: Strategic Implications of the
Farewell Discourse in Matthew 28
Tim H. Vanderpyl**

*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. Eliotⁱ

Introduction

Imagine this scenario. A revered CEO stands up in front of his eleven Vice Presidents and gives a riveting speech to them. He speaks articulately and succinctly while capturing every tidbit of their imaginations. He speaks with passion and gives them a mission to carry out in the future. Every word 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. He then walks out the door, leaves the building and is tragically killed while driving to a lunch meeting. His followers' last memory of him is this riveting speech, and the eleven men 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 like to analyze the phonetics of speech, without taking to heart the long-lasting meaning of words. Mission statements are bantered about, posted on beautiful and colorful plaques, and hidden away on the wall of the organization's waiting room. Do they actually get taken to heart? How many people can quote their organization's mission, let alone live it out? 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 few moments, talked to them, and then left shortly after. He summed up His entire ministry in a few actions and words and started the greatest and longest lasting 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.ⁱⁱ 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.ⁱⁱⁱ This paper 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. It considers the social and cultural impact of this passage using Robbins' model of socio-rhetorical analysis^{iv} and integrates strategic leadership theory throughout my analysis.

Target Audience

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. Matthew's version of Jesus' words is the only direct commandment to go and make disciples in the New Testament.^v We do not know their initial response, but we do know their long-term response: a determination to carry out this mission until death. 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."^{vi} 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 3 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. A mission does not have to wait for talent; rather, it creates talent through the mission.

Specific Social Topics Within This Text

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.^{vii}

Conversionist

The conversionist response is characterized by a view that the world is corrupt because people are corrupt.^{viii} 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.

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. Jesus’ command was not just to evangelize, but rather, to change all aspects of an individual’s spiritual and social life by the power of the Gospel. Potential disciples are to be immersed in the character of the triune God.^{ix}

Revolutionist

The revolutionist proclaims that the old world must be destroyed so that a new world can be built. Jesus declared this many times.^x The term “kingdom of God” could be intertwined with “revolution of God.”^{xi} 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.^{xii} Lewis’ viewpoint has been subject to much debate, but does illustrate the revolutionary impact of Jesus’ words.^{xiii}

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.^{xiv} Robbins notes that the “goal of a utopian response is to establish a new social organization that will eliminate evil.”^{xv} Jesus did come to earth to establish this new envisioned utopia, although it was very different than what the people thought it would be. He spent three years describing his core ideology and painted an envisioned future of what this utopia may consist of.^{xvi}

Honor, Guilt, and Rights Cultures

Robbins describes the impact that cultural viewpoints of honor, guilt and rights have on interpreting scripture.^{xvii} 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.

Jesus routinely and strategically included minorities and women into his teachings and new Kingdom.^{xviii} 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” (v.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” (v.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 7b). Again, Jesus emphasized the important place of women in his new Kingdom. Matthew then writes that the eleven disciples worshipped Jesus (v.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 (v.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.

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. *Ascribed honor* is placed passively on a person, while *acquired honor* is actively sought out by a person.^{xix} 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.

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. Missions must be clear and concise, must paint the future, must use a positive tense, must have an outward focus and must be encouraging.

Clear and Concise

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 become proprietary about that individual mission.^{xx} This mission is not any one Christian’s invention, but all Christians are expected to carry. Jesus noted this when he declared that “as the Father has sent me, so I send you”^{xxi}

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.^{xxii} This is also known as the “butterfly effect”. Jesus started a movement within eleven men that has carried for 2000 years. A small, disruptive change catalyzed a revolution. He 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.

Paint 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”. There is one dominant and controlling imperative in this passage: “make disciples.” The other action words, “going”, “baptizing”, and “teaching” are dependant 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.^{xxiii}

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.

Positive Tense

Jesus also chose to focus on the positive and He 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. 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!

Outwardly Focused

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.

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, they know they can't predict every last detail of the future, but they know they are going. Demanding performance challenges tend 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.^{xxiv}

Encouraging

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 followers? “Words of affirmation” is one of the five love languages that people use to communicate love. All people need affirmation, but some people's fuel for life is dependant on that affirmation.^{xxv} In a mission that fueled a cultural revolution, the significance of encouragement must be noted in the mission that started it.

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? One writer notes that “even martyrs, prisoners, and persecuted believers have experienced his presence, his peace and assurance in their most severe trials and experiences.”^{xxvi} Even those killed for carrying out this mission felt reassured that Jesus was still at their side while they were being tortured and killed. For example, consider Stephen's story in Acts 6-7.

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.^{xxvii} What would Jesus

reply? Would He wish that He used more superfluous words? Would He add on amendments to clarify what He really meant? Would He change the target audience of the mission? Would He 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.

ⁱ T.S. Eliot in “Four Quartets”

ⁱⁱ Day, D. (2007, Spring). A fresh reading of Jesus’ last words: Matthew 28:16:20. *Review and Expositor*, 104.

ⁱⁱⁱ Krentz, E. (2006, February) Make disciples: Matthew on evangelism. *Currents in theology and mission*, 33(1), 25.

^{iv} Robbins (1996). *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, chapter 3.

^v Krentz, 2006.

^{vi} Pfeiffer, W.J. (1989). *Shaping strategic planning*. Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman Trade, 120.

^{vii} Robbins, 1996, 72-74.

^{viii} Robbins, 1996, 72.

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

^x See Matthew 16.18-19, Mark 1:14-15, and John 2.19-20 for examples of Jesus’ declarations to destroy the old kingdom and rebuild a new Kingdom in its place.

^{xi} Wenham, D. (1983). *The parables of Jesus*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 22-23.

^{xii} Lewis, C.S. (1952). *Mere Christianity*. London: Collins.

^{xiii} For an in-depth study of the trilemma, see Kreeft, P. (1988). *Fundamentals of the faith: Essays in Christian apologetics*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 59.

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

^{xv} Robbins, 1996, 74

^{xvi} Collins & Porras describe the two essential and intertwined components of a successful vision as being an envisioned future and a core ideology. (Collins, J.C. & Porras, J.I. (1997). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies*. New York: HarperBusiness).

^{xvii} Robbins, 1996, 76

^{xviii} See Sparks, K.L. (2006). Gospel as conquest: Mosaic typology in Matthew 28:16-20. *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, 68, p.651-663 for a further discussion of Matthew’s description of this inclusiveness.

^{xix} Robbins, 1996, 76

^{xx} Lee, M. (2008, Autumn). The five marks of a mission. *Global Connections Paper No.29*, p.i.

^{xxi} John 20:21

^{xxii} T.I. Sanders (1998). *Strategic thinking and the new science*. New York: the Free Press, chapter 2.

^{xxiii} De Kluyver, C.A. & Pearce, J.A. (2006). *Strategy: A view from the top (an executive perspective)*. Upper Saddle River, NK: Pearson Prentice Hall, 8.

^{xxiv} Katzenbach, J.R. & Smith, D.K. (1999). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high-performance organization*. New York: HarperBusiness, 3.

^{xxv} Chapman, G. (2004). *The five love languages: How to express heartfelt commitment to your mate*. Chicago: Northfield Publishing.

^{xxvi} Hostetler, J.J. (1988). *Matthew explained: The gospel story of Jesus as King*. Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 175.

^{xxvii} Illustration adapted from Ford, L. (1991). *Transforming leadership: Jesus' way of creating vision, shaping values & empowering change*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 77.

About the Author

Tim Vanderpyl is a Certified Human Resources Professional (CHRP) with Canada's largest Catholic healthcare organization. He is also a Doctor of Strategic Leadership student in the School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship at Regent University. He holds a Master of Arts in Leadership from Trinity Western University. He can be reached via email at vanderpyl@gmail.com.