

**Interpretation of the Great Commission in Latvia: An Analysis of Lutheran and Baptist Documents**

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This paper explores how the understanding of the passage of Matthew 28:18-20 (Great Commission) has defined the understanding of mission work in Lutheran and Baptist churches in Latvia since the nation's independence in 1990. Like in other former Soviet bloc countries, the church in Latvia has been in a process of discovery of mission. Consideration of the Latvian story could give some insight and keys for how missions could be developed in other countries that share a similar past.

**Introduction**

Latvia is a small nation on the shores of the Baltic Sea. Because of a very complicated history there has been very little awareness of mission work both in Latvia and from Latvia to other countries in its 800 years of Christian history. During Soviet times, the church in Latvia was so limited that there might have been some personal evangelism, but no apparent evidence of engaging in mission elsewhere. The call to the Latvian Church at the end of 1980s could be expressed by the Latvian poet Paegle, even though he wrote in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: 'Wake up, raise up, you weary people! Let those who were sleeping in darkness and rigidity for so long open their eyes...' <sup>1</sup> For the 26 years since 1990 Latvia has been an independent democratic country and the church as the Body of Christ has experienced freedom in sharing the gospel. The church has been waking up from its forced sleep. This is the longest period of time ever in history that Latvia has been an independent nation, therefore this is a completely new opportunity to build an understanding of mission work. The church needs to understand God's heart for the world and then because of this understanding and relationship, mission work should flow. Mission work consists of making disciples and teaching them to obey all that Jesus taught. This is the mission of the Body of Christ which should be done by a majority of people within their own country and by some small minority who would go to other nations.

During these past years I have observed that Latvian churches enjoy being a mission field, in the sense of receiving spiritual and physical help from outside. I agree that the missionary task can be formulated as 'the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole world.' <sup>2</sup> This would mean that the Latvian Church, in addition to receiving help itself, should also take part in taking the gospel within Latvia and abroad. By going out the Latvian church will open itself to other experiences and will learn to give, not just receive. The Latvian church has something unique to offer to the rest of the world. Therefore in the Latvian context there is a need for a church which looks outside of itself, which is ready to give.

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<sup>1</sup> Paegle, Leons. *Noslēguma koncerts. Dziesmas jauktajiem koriem* [Closing Concert. Songs for Mixed Choirs]. Rīga: Kultūrizglītības un nemateriālā mantojuma centrs, 2011, p. 91, my translation

<sup>2</sup> Bosch, David Jacobus. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 10

In Latvia the three main Christian denominations are Roman Catholics (389670 members), Russian Orthodox (370000) and Evangelical Lutherans (712891).<sup>3</sup> Due to limitations of space this paper will focus only on the Protestant understanding of mission. The Lutheran Church of Latvia was chosen because it is the largest Protestant denomination and is still perceived as the main or leading church in Latvian society, even though today it is no longer a state church. Therefore this paper will in the majority look at the Lutheran Church. Furthermore in order to broaden the research of the Protestant understanding, the paper also includes the second largest Protestant denomination in Latvia, the Baptists (7026 members).<sup>4</sup> The Baptist Church does not play such an important role in Latvian society, but since in Baptist beginnings there was a very strong emphasis on mission, this paper will also look at the Baptist Church. There are other denominations that also have mission understanding, but due to space limitations this study examines only Lutherans and Baptists in Latvia.

Martin Luther and therefore the Lutheran Church finds the Bible as the main source for teaching and church life. *Sola Scriptura* was one of the essential doctrines of the Reformation.<sup>5</sup> As for the Baptist Church in Latvia, both Randall and Tervits state that the Bible was very important for the first Baptist churches in Latvia.<sup>6</sup> The whole Bible can be understood as a mission text book, since God is the one who sends. First he sent his son, but also he sends his people to share the good news of God's reign.

Due to space limitations this essay will consider just one biblical passage, Matthew 28:18-20, and consider how the hermeneutics of that passage help or prevent building a new understanding of mission work in the Lutheran and Baptist churches of Latvia. This passage, known as the Great Commission, has been an important motive for global mission in the modern missionary movement.<sup>7</sup> Before looking into how the Latvian churches consider this passage, it is important to have some understanding of the hermeneutical problems in general.

### Short introduction on the problem of Bible interpretation

Around 2000 years have passed since the New Testament was written. As Keith Jones notes sacred texts are not static and almost every generation of Christians has reinterpreted the Bible in order to make it relevant for their concerns.<sup>8</sup> De Groot cites Schillebeeckx, who says that hermeneutics is the attempt to bridge the gap between past

<sup>3</sup> Publiskais pārskats par Tieslietu ministrijā iesniegtajiem reliģisko organizāciju pārskatiem par darbību 2013. gadā [Public Review of the Reports submitted to the Ministry of Justice by the religious organizations of the activity in 2013], <https://www.tm.gov.lv/lv/cits/publiskais-parskats-par-tieslietu-ministrija-iesniegtajiem-relijisko-organizaciju-parskatiem-par-dar>, accessed November 30, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Public Review.

<sup>5</sup>cf. Triglot Concordia. *The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church*. St.Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1921. Book of Concord, Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Rule and Norm, 3, p. 851 and Rule and Norm 9, p. 853, also Book of Concord, The Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article II, 15, p. 467

<sup>6</sup> Randall, Ian M. *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe*. Schwarzenfeld: Neufeld Verlag, 2009, p. 104; Tervits, Jānis. *Latvijas Baptistu vēsture: faktu mozaika* [History of Latvian Baptists: Mosaic of Facts]. Rīga: Latvijas Baptistu draudžu savienība, 1999, p. 32

<sup>7</sup> Ott, Craig, Stephen J. Strauss, Timothy C. Tennent, un A. Moreau. *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. Encountering Mission edition. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2010, p. 181

<sup>8</sup> As cited in Lecture: *Reading the Bible historically*, Keith Jones, 2012, p. 1

and present from the perspective of understanding and interpretation.<sup>9</sup> There have been different approaches to interpreting the Bible over the course of centuries.

For the original readers of the New Testament, the text had a literal meaning since it was written to them. John Cassian has developed a 'fourfold understanding of Scripture – the letter (facts), allegory (what is to be believed), the moral (what one has to do) and the anagogical (what is hoped for).'<sup>10</sup> Many things in hermeneutics are determined by the context and culture of the community which is reading a text and the period of history in which they are reading this text. The relationship between the reader of the text and the text itself has become more important in today's hermeneutics.<sup>11</sup>

Since this essay will deal with understanding the biblical text regarding mission, it is important to look at the missional hermeneutic or seeing the mission of God and humans in the Bible.<sup>12</sup> Bosch argues that Christian faith is essentially missionary.<sup>13</sup> It can be said that the Bible is a missionary book from cover to cover. God is the first missionary sending his son. Through the centuries communities of Christians have been trying to interpret what this sending means for them.

### **The Great Commission in the historical setting**

In the modern mission movement since William Carey, Matthew 28:18-20 has received high standing. But Bosch observes that for a long time New Testament scholars had shown little interest in this passage.<sup>14</sup> Only in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars have started to look at this passage in the context of the whole gospel and come to the conclusion 'that the entire gospel points to those final verses.'<sup>15</sup> Spindler mentions that the discussion of the 'Great Commission' among scholars has had two main themes: the imperative 'make disciples' and the word 'nations.'<sup>16</sup> There has not been so much emphasis on the first imperative 'go'. It could be asserted that this imperative is not important to the argument, but it is a necessary prerequisite to reach out to the 'nations'. At the same time till the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the 'Great Commission' was not the only motive for mission, but mission was taken in a larger context. There had been other scriptures that also served as a motive for mission.<sup>17</sup> Later though this particular portion of scripture became a call to obedience to the last command of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

The task of this essay is to focus on the passage of Matthew 28:18-20, but it is crucial to remember that this passage should not be taken out of the context of the whole Gospel of Matthew. Bosch states that '[i]n Matthew's view, Christians find their true identity when they are involved in mission...'<sup>19</sup> Since this paper will focus on Lutheran and Baptist churches, it

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<sup>9</sup> Hoedemaker, L. A., and A. Camps. *Missiology: An Ecumenical Introduction: Texts and Contexts of Global Christianity*. Edited by Frans J. Verstraelen. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1995, p. 151

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Lecture: *Reading the Bible historically*, p. 3

<sup>11</sup> Jones, Lecture: *Reading the Bible historically*, p. 3

<sup>12</sup> Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006, pp. 17, 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 8

<sup>14</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 56

<sup>15</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 57

<sup>16</sup> Hoedemaker and Camps (eds.), *Missiology*, pp. 128-129

<sup>17</sup> For example Acts 16:9, Matt 24:14 or John 10:10

<sup>18</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 341

<sup>19</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 83

is important to look at the original sources of those churches and see how their founders have interpreted Matthew 28:18-20.

### **Historical Understanding of Matthew 28:18-20 by founders of Lutheran and Baptist Churches**

#### *Martin Luther (1483-1546)*

There is no written evidence that Martin Luther himself ever preached a sermon from Matthew 28:18-20. Therefore his understanding of this passage has to be gained by searching his other works and looking for references to this scripture.

Verse 18 says: 'And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth".'<sup>20</sup> Luther refers to this verse more than once and in all these references he takes quite a literal understanding that all authority is given to Christ, including the human incarnate Christ born of Virgin Mary and also the divine Christ, who has power over everything.<sup>21</sup>

Verse 19 says: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,'<sup>22</sup> With this verse it is possible to see that Luther interprets and refers to this passage in at least four different ways. The main theme Luther speaks about is the question of baptism.<sup>23</sup> Another way Luther talks about this verse is about the original disciples and apostles. He states that they were given the task to preach and teach and in his day this understanding applied to ordained priests.<sup>24</sup> Luther uses this verse once to talk about the Trinity.<sup>25</sup> Yes, it seems that Luther sees the geographical dimension of this verse. He mentions that this is the gospel for all, that Christ rules the entire world and that the apostles were called to go to the entire world.<sup>26</sup> But in what remains of his writings he does not indicate that this should result in either a clerical or a lay missionary movement.

Verse 20 says 'teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'<sup>27</sup> Luther uses this scripture in many different ways.<sup>28</sup> His main concern is about Christ and the church; that Christ promises to be with the church

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<sup>20</sup> NASB

<sup>21</sup> See for example Pelikan, Jaroslav, ed. *Luther's Works, Volume 24 (Sermons on Gospel of St John Chapters 14-16)*. Concordia Publishing House, n.d., p. 85. Because I will be referring to different volumes of the same edition, from now on I will use short version of reference and full reference can be found in the Bibliography. Luther's Works, Vol. 12, p. 56; Vol. 12, pp. 132-133; Vol. 15, pp. 293-294; Vol. 20, p. 202-203; Vol. 26, p. 228

<sup>22</sup> NASB

<sup>23</sup> See for example Luther's Works, Vol. 3, pp. 91-92, 104; Luther's Works, Vol. 6, p. 128; Luther's Works, Vol. 12, p. 369; Luther's Works, Vol. 22, p. 513; Luther's Works, Vol. 23, p. 79; Luther, Martin. *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*. Vol. One. Muhlenberg Press, 1915, p. 306

<sup>24</sup> See Luther's Works, Vol. 25, p. 8; Luther's Works, Vol. 26, p. 101; Luther, Martin. *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*. Vol. Two. Muhlenberg Press, 1943, pp. 278, 449

<sup>25</sup> Luther's Works, Vol. 12, p. 288

<sup>26</sup> See, for example Luther's Works, Vol. 13, p. 49, Luther's Works, Vol. 20, p. 338; Luther's Works, Vol. 22, p. 512; Luther's Works, Vol. 28, p. 263

<sup>27</sup> NASB

<sup>28</sup> See for example Luther's Works, Vol. 8, p. 187; Luther's Works, Vol. 17, p. 309

till the end of the age.<sup>29</sup> More than once Luther uses this verse when he talks about 'us', meaning the believers of that time, that Christ is on 'our' side and that Christ is with 'us'.<sup>30</sup>

It appears from the above that Luther did not see these verses as a motivation for international cross-cultural mission. Warneck confirms that Luther simply did not speak of foreign mission.<sup>31</sup> Bosch mentions that Luther rejected all ideas of the Great Commission calling for non-territorial ecclesiastical ministry.<sup>32</sup> Therefore it can be said that Luther himself is not an example of interpreting this scripture for a mission movement.

#### *Adrian Saravia (1531-1613)*

Even though the reformers did not apparently argue for an international cross-cultural mission movement, there were some during this time who contended that the 'Great Commission' was binding to the church, as Bosch remarks.<sup>33</sup> For example, Saravia used this scripture and argued that the promise of Jesus of Mt. 28:20 would be active if the church obeyed Mt. 28:19. Jongeneel calls Saravia '[t]he first Protestant theologian to break with this exegesis [that the 'Great Commission' applied to the apostles only and their successors, the bishops] and to plead for the view that Jesus' missionary command still applies fully here and now,'<sup>34</sup> meaning for everyone. Hence it is possible to argue that even though Luther himself did not emphasize mission, there were other Lutheran/Protestant theologians who emphasized that mission should be the task of everyone. Lutheran countries such as Germany, Sweden and Norway have long been missionary sending nations. Before proceeding with how things stand with the Latvian Lutheran church of today, this paper considers the Baptist founders' perceptions of mission.

#### *Johann Gerhard Oncken (1800-1884)*

Latvian Baptists have their roots and received their first help from the German Baptist church in Memel (Klaipeda, Lithuania) in establishing and developing their churches.<sup>35</sup> Therefore it is important to look at the views of one of the founders of German Baptists, Johann Gerhard Oncken, who also visited Memel in 1841.<sup>36</sup> Randall calls Oncken the European Baptist 'pioneer' and 'father' of the continental Baptists.<sup>37</sup> Balders in his work tells the story about Oncken being in Edinburgh and talking to Dr. Guthrie. Oncken considered every member of a Baptist church as being a missionary.<sup>38</sup> This same attitude has been part of the Baptists in Latvia since before Soviet times. It is a 'new era' now so the question is: Is the Latvian Baptist church thinking of mission today?

<sup>29</sup> See, for example Luther's Works, Companion vol., p. 206; Luther's Works, Vol. 8, p. 81; Luther's Works, Vol. 11, pp. 452-453; Luther's Works, Vol. 13, pp. 18-19

<sup>30</sup> See, for example Luther's Works, Vol. 6, p. 311; Luther's Works, Vol. 8, p. 183; Luther, Martin. *Works of Martin Luther: With Introductions and Notes*. Vol. Five. Muhlenberg Press, 1931, pp. 179, 227, 269-270

<sup>31</sup> Warneck, Gustav. *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions*. 3d English ed., translated from the eight German ed. Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1906, p. 11

<sup>32</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 242

<sup>33</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 247

<sup>34</sup> Hoedemaker and A. Camps (eds.), *Missiology*, p. 223

<sup>35</sup> Tervits, *Latvijas Baptistu vēsture*, p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Tervits, *Latvijas Baptistu vēsture*, p. 42; Randall, *Communities of Conviction*, p. 100.

<sup>37</sup> Randall, *Communities of Conviction*, p. 49.

<sup>38</sup> Balders, Gunter. *Theurer Bruder Oncken: D. Leben Johann Gerhard Onckens in Bildern u. Dokumenten*. Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1984, p. 92

**Interpretation of Matt 28:18-20 by Baptists today (1991-2012)** - Information from 'Baptistu Draudzēm' (For Baptist Churches, published 1991-1994) and 'Baptistu Vēstnesis' (Baptist Herald, published 1995-2012)

This magazine was and is geared toward Baptist church members and shows an understanding of the Baptist way of life and understanding of scripture. Therefore it would be accurate to say that this is a valid source for looking for an interpretation of this scripture by Baptists. It could be noticed that this scripture has been emphasized and used in three periods of time more than in others. The first was soon after Latvia became independent in the beginning of the 1990s, and the main 'champion' for this scripture was Valda Lapsa. The second was around 2002-2005 when the Canadian Latvian, Jānis Šmits became the Bishop for the Union of Latvian Baptist Churches. Coming from the 'free' world he brought with him an understanding of foreign mission. The third period started in 2006 when Pēteris Sproģis became the new Bishop. He has been very actively promoting the idea of mission in general and refers to this scripture comparatively often.

In the Baptist journals verse 28:18 is interpreted as being quite literally about Christ's authority.<sup>39</sup> Verse 28:20 is cited by a few authors and they all essentially use this verse literally about Christ being with us always. This verse is used as an encouragement and reminder of Christ's presence.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding verse 28:19 there are more diverse interpretations and uses. Of the three verses of the passage this verse is quoted most often. The three main uses and interpretations are regarding making disciples, evangelism and mission task. Some authors also use this verse to support teachings on baptism,<sup>41</sup> work of the church in the Great Commission, the Trinity<sup>42</sup> and some other issues.<sup>43</sup> In the last four years this whole scripture reference (Mat 28), has been used as a foundation for a church planting movement in Latvia called M4. M4 states that every disciple of Jesus can take part in planting a new church or a missional group.<sup>44</sup>

### *Making Disciples*

One of the interpretations of verse 28:19 is about making disciples. It can be seen that the reference to making disciples is used periodically.<sup>45</sup> The first time the reference is made is in regards to American missionaries coming to Latvia because of the Great Commission.<sup>46</sup> A number of authors state that in the process of making disciples we need to follow Christ's example of making disciples, grow daily, be a testimony for God in works and life and help the new Christians to grow.<sup>47</sup> This interpretation of verse 28:19 certainly poses a challenge

<sup>39</sup> See, for example Matroze: 2000, p. 297; Šmits:2005, p. 3; Eisāns:2006, p. 1. Due to the immense amount of journal articles used for reference in this essay from now on I will use the short references in the footnotes and then full bibliographic references can be found in the Bibliography.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Lapsa:1997, p. 168; Cakars:2000, p. 376; Šmits:2006, p. 1

<sup>41</sup> See for example Bīķis:1996, p. 263; Matroze:2002, p. 16. Also Credo of Christian Life:1999, translation can be found in IBTS MTh dissertation 'New Wine in New Wineskins' by Oļegs Jermolajevs, pp. 100 - 102

<sup>42</sup> See, for example Eisāns:1995, p. 134

<sup>43</sup> See, for example Bīķis:1998, p. 370

<sup>44</sup> Sproģis:2009, p. 7; Fokrote:2010, p. 4; Šterns:2011, p. 5; Šterns:2012, p. 7

<sup>45</sup> References could be found twice in 1991, then 1995, 1999, 2002 and then only in 2012

<sup>46</sup> Eisāns:1991, pp. 2-6

<sup>47</sup> See, for example Darzniece:1991, p. 3; Lapsa:1995 (No 1), p. 10; Lapsa:1999, p. 6; Kuzmane:2002, p. 246; Jūrmalis:2012, p. 6

for a believer of today to do something about their faith, but makes no direct reference to a cross-cultural mission movement.

### *Evangelism*

Evangelism and sharing of faith is a very important attribute of Baptist churches. Some authors use this passage of Matt 28:19 but not as often as would seem appropriate. When it is referred to it always means reaching out to people in Latvia who have not yet heard the Good News. There are two references by Valda Lapsa in the early days of independence (1991 and 1995). First Lapsa refers to the Congress organized by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association stating that evangelism is very important.<sup>48</sup> She then also argues that the main task for the church is evangelism based on this scripture.<sup>49</sup> The next references come only after the year 2000. Here the emphasis is very much on reaching out to unbelievers in Latvia and that this is the task for every Christian and it first starts with prayers.<sup>50</sup> This is another challenge for Baptists in Latvia. Interpreting this verse 28:19 as a task of evangelism shows concern for Latvia and people in Latvia. Especially in the beginning years after the fall of Communism evangelism was truly essential. Even today, 20 years later it is doubtful that every person in Latvia has heard the Gospel so the task remains.

### *Mission Task*

The principal question for this essay is how Mat 28:18-20 has defined mission work. In the magazines 'Baptistu Draudzēm' and 'Baptistu Vēstnesis' there are many times when this scripture is interpreted regarding mission. The earliest reference to mission and this scripture was by Šeldere, where she noted that everyone is given the command to be a missionary; first at his/her home village and town. This is in connection with OM ship Logos II being in Rīga.<sup>51</sup> So for the first five or so years of independence no one referred to foreign mission, reading this scripture. References were more on making disciples and evangelism and therefore understanding it as a local ministry. Even when mission was mentioned here, there was no call for foreign mission, but for starting with home. Šķuburs in 1998 claims verse 19 as the task for mission, but seeing the context of the article, it is clear that he is against foreign mission organizations coming into Latvia. Because of this it is hard to understand what he means by mission.<sup>52</sup>

Bartkevičs in his series of articles on church growth shows this passage more than once regarding the mission task. His first is on the individual level, where Jesus trained his disciples for three years and then he reminded them that their mission was outward focused and pointed out that they should be a walking church.<sup>53</sup> Then he points out also the church level – what are churches doing or should be doing in making disciples of all nations. In his work he also makes references to the works of McGavran.<sup>54</sup> Bartkevičs calls the church and every believer (or the New Israel) to be a testimony for the gentiles.<sup>55</sup> Even though Bartkevičs uses the phrase 'all nations', it still seems that his concern is for Latvia only. He

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<sup>48</sup> Lapsa:1991, p. 12

<sup>49</sup> Lapsa:1995 (No 5), p. 169

<sup>50</sup> See, for example Riekstins:2000, p. 24; Šmits:2003, p. 1; Lūsis:2004, p. 4; Jermolajevs, Sproģis:2006, p. 3

<sup>51</sup> Šeldere:1995, p. 147

<sup>52</sup> Šķuburs:1998, p. 594

<sup>53</sup> Bartkevičs:1999, No 10, p. 395

<sup>54</sup> Bartkevičs:1999, No 8, p. 310

<sup>55</sup> Barkevičs:1999, No 10, p. 396

does not indicate an openness to thinking about foreign mission. The importance of church as the one fulfilling the Great Commission is illustrated by three more authors.<sup>56</sup>

Really the new wave concerning mission (including foreign mission) and this scripture started with Bishop Šmits in 2002. He gave a challenge for Latvians to look further than just the Latvian borders.<sup>57</sup> He also confirmed that Matt 28:19 applies to all believers, and that Latvian Baptists also should believe in mission work in the whole world and should support mission work.<sup>58</sup> Two authors challenge Latvians for short term mission.<sup>59</sup> These are the Brazilian-Latvian Hanss Bērziņš and Bishop Sproģis. Bērziņš argues that Latvians should be involved in mission regardless of the economic crisis Latvia is experiencing now.<sup>60</sup> Bishop Sproģis concludes that our God is a mission God, therefore the church needs to be missional.<sup>61</sup>

From all the above it is possible to see that even though right after independence Baptists were not interested in foreign mission due to different reasons, as time has progressed there is more and more emphasis on mission in Baptist churches. Interpretation of Matt 28:18-20 is helping Baptists to understand mission work, including foreign mission.

#### **Interpretation of Matt 28:18-20 by Lutherans today (1989-2012) – Information from 'Svētdienas Rīts' (The Sunday Morning)**

Since the Lutheran church was the state church during the first independence time (1920-1940), most Latvians would identify themselves as Lutherans, even if they had not been in the church during the Soviet times. Therefore the newspaper 'Svētdienas Rīts' was the first on spiritual values and Christianity that was published during *Perestroika* starting in 1989. At first the newspaper was an addition to an existing newspaper. Only later it became the official newspaper of the Lutheran church. This newspaper reached out to most of the Latvian society. Therefore in the initial years it was teaching the basics of Christianity to the generation who grew up during the years of atheism. Consequently 'Svētdienas Rīts' in the initial years had articles not only on Christianity but also on different subjects the society had an interest in and some years had very little reference on the scripture of interest to this essay. But since 'Svētdienas Rīts' is the only and official newspaper of the Lutheran church and the target audience is church members it is a valid source for looking for an interpretation of this scripture by Lutherans.

The Lutheran interpretation is more diverse and three main themes from this scripture emphasize: the missionary/mission task, making disciples and Christ's presence with us. Verse 28:18 by itself is used only once by Jēkabsons quite literally with reference to God's authority stating that it is greater than that of any human being.<sup>62</sup>

The Lutheran church appears to be more attracted to the promise of Christ's presence than does the Baptist church. Verse 28:20 is used as a reference more times in Lutheran than Baptist resources. This interpretation is usually quite literal. Christ was with his disciples

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<sup>56</sup> Lanka:2000, p. 465; Sproģis:2002, p. 45; Stūre:2002, p. 263

<sup>57</sup> Šmits:2002, pp. 403-404

<sup>58</sup> Šmits:2005, No 2, p. 1; Šmits:2005, No 3, p. 1

<sup>59</sup> Meške:2006, p. 6; Kukīte:2009, p. 11

<sup>60</sup> Bērziņš:2010, p. 2

<sup>61</sup> Sproģis:2012, p. 2

<sup>62</sup> Jēkabsons:1995, p. 1



physically and then upon his leaving he pointed out that there will be an eternal presence.<sup>63</sup> That gives encouragement to each believer. Christ's presence is a vital reminder of Christ's resurrection<sup>64</sup> and we can celebrate that in the Holy Communion.<sup>65</sup> Slenczka states that the existence of the Church in Latvia is a testimony of God's grace and Christ's presence.<sup>66</sup>

Verse 28:19 is interpreted by Lutherans in different ways. In the early years it was interpreted as evangelism.<sup>67</sup> Baptism is one of the sacraments of the Church therefore in the early years people had questions about it, so some authors answered those questions using this verse.<sup>68</sup> Pavasars continues the thought that after baptism there should be teaching on how to live the Christian life.<sup>69</sup> Some authors<sup>70</sup> interpret this verse as the task of the church and individuals to preach; some others<sup>71</sup> understand this verse to speak of Christian teaching and learning – adults and children. This verse is also used to remind readers that we should observe all that Christ taught<sup>72</sup> and that we need to share the Gospel with the whole society using all opportunities.<sup>73</sup> But most of the emphasis when referring to this verse is on making disciples and mission and missionaries.

### *Making Disciples*

During Soviet times the Lutheran church was mostly limited to Sunday services and during those times there was not much talk about a personal relationship with God or making disciples. After the Soviet Union fell apart, the church started to talk about making disciples using Matt 28:19. This was directed mostly to the internal context in Latvia. A number of authors gave a call to personal discipleship and making disciples.<sup>74</sup> Archbishop Vanags challenged that the way of discipleship is to grow in spirit, love and faith<sup>75</sup> and that the vision of the Latvian Lutheran church is to make disciples, care for the poor, widows and orphans.<sup>76</sup> Other authors also used this verse literally saying that making disciples is important and that this is a task of the church.<sup>77</sup> In the last few years the Latvian Lutheran church has started a mission and discipleship project in Ireland where there is a huge Latvian immigrant population. Pastor Brūklene had been making disciples there.<sup>78</sup>

### *Mission Task*

In 1989 the first reference to a mission task was made with the idea of reaching out to the Russian population of Latvia.<sup>79</sup> The Lausanne Declaration on mission work was translated and published twice, showing that it is considered an important document by the Lutheran church.<sup>80</sup> Priednieks asks the question: 'Can Latvians be missionaries?' and his answer is

<sup>63</sup> See for example Kalme:1993, p. 6

<sup>64</sup> Mesters:1996, p. 2

<sup>65</sup> Mesters:2005, p. 2

<sup>66</sup> Slenczka:1999, p. 4 and Slenczka:2005, pp. 1, 6

<sup>67</sup> See for example Priednieks:1992, pp. 1, 7

<sup>68</sup> Feldmanis:1990, p. 4; Vecmanis:1992, p. 6

<sup>69</sup> Pavasars:1993, p. 3

<sup>70</sup> Veikerts:1996, p. 8; Dauksts:2000, p. 1; Ginters:2006, pp. 1, 6

<sup>71</sup> Ivanovs:1996, pp. 1-2; Kaire:1996, p. 7; Slenczka:2003, p. 1

<sup>72</sup> Zeiferts:2001, p. 5 and Miglons:2002, p. 3

<sup>73</sup> Ābolniece:2006, p. 7

<sup>74</sup> See, for example Ozoliņa:1995, p. 7; Irbe:2003, p. 2; Zikmanis: 2009, p. 1

<sup>75</sup> Vanags:2009, p. 1

<sup>76</sup> Vanags:2010, p. 13

<sup>77</sup> Sproģis:2010, p. 5; Reča:2010, p. 10

<sup>78</sup> Štromane:2010, p. 9

<sup>79</sup> Lorencs:1989, p. 2

<sup>80</sup> Lausanne Declaration: 1989, p. 5;

'yes' since some short term missionaries from Latvia had been serving in other countries by 1994.<sup>81</sup> The next references about a mission task are found after 2000. A number of authors argue that we are called to go and going is the opposite of sitting and the one who sends is the living God. The sending is universal to all nations and all peoples and that the Great Commission means using all means and tools available in order to teach and preach in Christian love and humility, first to our closest people and then to the ends of the earth.<sup>82</sup>

In 2007 the Latvian Lutheran church established a Mission Committee and since that time there are more records about mission. Feldmanis points out that the mission of every church can be understood as both domestic and foreign mission.<sup>83</sup> Archbishop Vanags identifies that we (Latvian Christians) have not taken the command of Jesus of going and making disciples seriously therefore presently the Lutheran church in Latvia is developing a mission strategy— mission work is important and it should be done locally and also in foreign countries.<sup>84</sup>

From all the above it is possible to observe that the Latvian Lutheran church has been thinking about engaging in local and foreign mission work. The foundation for that very often is the understanding and interpretation of Matt 28:18-20.

## Conclusion

This paper explores the interpretation of Matt 28:18-20. Luther interpreted this passage quite literally without reference to a mission movement. Saravia argued that Jesus' missionary command applies to everyone. Oncken agreed with Saravia and also considered every member of his church to be a missionary. Exploring Latvian church history it is important to ask whether the Church has neglected the need to go from their country. The Latvian church under Soviet rule had little possibility of going into missions. That history contributed to forming a church oriented more toward receiving than giving. Even so, this study confirms that Matt 28:18-20 has been a significant scripture for Baptist and Lutheran churches (the two main Protestant denominations in Latvia) regarding building mission momentum. There is a need for making disciples in Latvia that reach out to all different spheres of society. There is a need for Latvians to serve as missionaries in other countries and cultures, and in this way to be a blessing to other nations. This essay shows that both Baptist and Lutheran churches are ready to take part in this task, and could also serve as an encouragement for other churches globally.

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<sup>81</sup> Priednieks:1994, p. 12

<sup>82</sup> Kalme:2000, p. 6; Slenczka:2001, pp. 1, 2; Brūvers:2001, p. 6

<sup>83</sup> Feldmanis:2007, p. 7

<sup>84</sup> Vanags: 2010, p. 11; Kupcis:2012, pp. 3, 10-11; Gailīte:2012, p. 21

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