

# Preaching Great Commission of the Book of Matthew 28: 18-20 in the Context of Indonesian Pluralism in Palangka Raya

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**Abstract.** Indonesian is a very diverse country is pluralism. Conditions like this, of course, have the potential for disputes between religions, ethnicities and cultures. Religion is present should bring peace to his people. Preaching Great Commission of the scripture, Matthew 28: 18-20, Jesus blessed them and said: All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Sometimes Christians understand the Great Commission by releasing the context so that many people misunderstand it. Preaching of the Great Commission in Indonesian must be able to answer challenges according to the context of existing pluralism. It is no longer on understanding to radically convert as much as possible but rather to social actions that bring peace and justice in this country. Indonesian will forever be pluralism because it is God's gift. Maintaining and caring for it is our shared duty, including religious preacher. The research method used is qualitative with the type of research is descriptive describing the phenomena that exist.

**Key Word:** Preaching, Great Commission, Pluralism.

## 1 Introduction

In Christianity, preaching is considered an urgent and sacred matter. For Christians, the act of preaching is consistent to what has been instructed as obligation in the Holy Bible. However, it is undeniable that in many cases preaching or evangelism often sets off conflicts, disputes and even clash between people when carried out without considering moral codes and in a manner that offends other religious groups. To deem one particular religion as the only right way, being exclusive in particular religion, or to judge others outside one's own religion as sinful and thus being fanatic are among wrong religious views that may trigger conflicts between religious groups.

Indonesia is a country of notable for its rich diversity (pluralism). The former Indonesian Religious Minister, Tarmizi Taher, once mentioned that Indonesia is "super plural" in its diversity of culture and religion. In view of such circumstances in Indonesia, it is likely that conflicts between religious groups may arise. Therefore, the government has put great efforts in making it certain that the citizen reserves the right for freedom of preaching their religion by issuing the Joint Ministerial Decree of Ministries of Religious Affairs and Domestic Affairs No. 1 of 1979 regarding Procedures for the Implementation of the Dissemination of Religion and Foreign Assistance to the Religious Institution in Indonesia, (Harmoni Vol. VII: 94), with the main purpose to support a peaceful, orderly and safe religious preaching and exposition.

Paul F. Knitter, a Catholic Priest, wrote that throughout the ecclesiastical history, Christians (of Europe and America) had viewed “the followers of other religions” as “different creature,” and even considered them as enemies or competitors. Indeed, there had been efforts to reach out to followers of other religions, but it was more aimed to convert them into Christians or to recruit them as members of particular church. However, as of mid XX century, this kind of attitude has been shifted both in pastoral and theological understanding and such change of theological view was explicitly expressed during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

In Indonesia, churches have been growing under direct influence from evangelists (zendingling) and the development of revival theology and fundamentalism of the west countries (Martin L. Sinaga, 2003:5). This theology concept has such particular feature which is oriented more to the growth, multiplication of church, repentance of ‘lost souls’ to cross into a new life and more “honorable” state. This view tends to consider others outside Christianity as infidel and sinful, not so much different from Knitter’s view.

Admittedly, such understanding is inherited from old theology concepts that view the world outside Christianity as objects to be “converted into Christians” and therefore everything about this theology concept tends to be very spiritual and insensible, making it difficult filter in new concepts of social theology which offers the church to be more open, critical, creative and dynamic towards the surrounding communities around the church communities, especially in the plural environment in Indonesia.

Furthermore, such inheritance of theological concept in Indonesia may hinder the Christianity view to see that relationships among religions are something crucial in developing theology across religion. When working together with other religious groups on social and political issues to seek freedom, churches would no longer be antipathy towards religious dialogues on harmony and union within a plural community. Of course, this is not a simple matter; in fact, it is almost like being on horns of dilemma between the act of preaching/evangelism as the sacred mandate from above and being in the context of pluralism in Indonesia.

The bible passage in Matthew 28:18-20 is famously known as the “Sacred Mandate”, which quoted what Jesus said: All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

If we look closely at the bible commentary of the books of Matthew, Matthew Hendry (2008:1565-1577) described that preaching/evangelism is the spearhead of the aforementioned Sacred Mandate, or to put it in other words, evangelism is the first step in the work of missionary. Evangelism can be considered as a proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ the almighty, the power of Holy Spirit, in the way that can be grasped by human thinking, to bring human beings to repent to Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church has to put gospel exposition to all people as the first priority. Preaching, religious teaching, prayers, program, plans, training and all related matters should revolve around this purpose. This passage to the church is assumed as the bible verse that calls for the world repentance and has been the strong foundation on which the followers are believed to have the responsibility to convert every people and bring them into the world of Christianity (Greek: proselytism).

The other commentary of the books of Matthew by J.T Nielsen talks about the power of Jesus Christ which is declared in verse 18. During Jesus’ life on earth, all the power (exousia) given unto Him by God Almighty had been demonstrated through many signs in different ways and various places. The source of His words and actions was thorough and clear. From

the biblical phrase of “All power in heaven and in earth” (band. Daniel 7:14), to “The Son of God is exalted on the throne of justice and kingdom” was completed in Jesus Christ (2015:195). The expression ‘go’ (Greek: *porueuthentes*) in Nielsen’s book is equal to the word ‘go’ that was said unto Abraham (Kejadian 12:1) and the 12 (twelve) disciples as they were sent for gospel. It also holds similar sense to the same word in the passage “go to the lost sheep of Israel (Matthew 10:5-6) and to all nations. In Nielsen’s point of view, all nations includes the entire man on earth, because through Abraham no nations were excluded from the blessing of God, thus preaching the gospel is not limited only for the Jews. The extent of Jesus’ messages (Greek: *panta ta ethne*) is equally broad as the extent of his power.

This implies that the Sacred Mandate is ever so important, not only because it is the ultimate mission of every church, but also because it means that new churches would be established when the followers obey the Sacred Mandate. The affirmation of the message “to bring every nations as the disciple of Jesus” was critically needed by churches at that time.

John Titaley wrote in his book “Religiositas di Alinea Tiga (Pluralisme, nasionalisme dan Transformasi Agama-Agama)” that Christianity these days is one religion that inherits exclusive religious attitude. If this attitude keeps going on, issues may arise. Exclusivity in religions should be addressed if people want to live in peace alongside the other. For as long as exclusivity exists, problems will follow in people’s life (2013:1-2). To Titaley, religion is a historical, social reality; although the values that support religious actions is believed to be sourced from divine reality, it is necessary to recognize that no man could absolutely understand the Divine One.

Churches these days should develop in the awareness of the context and reality in Indonesia, of which Indonesia is a plural country. Consequently, the term used here is ‘religiosity’ instead of religion or divine. It represents religious awareness, which comprises not only physical reality of human being, but also includes human awareness that the Divine One. This awareness applies to all religion followers, regardless what religion they follow. At this point of humane state, people of diverse religion would meet each other equally, humbly before God. From this point on, we expect to see the spark of light that would illuminate our ways through positive changes in religious relationship in Indonesia, including Christianity.(2013:i-ii).

Such point of views from Titaley have inspired most of his students to write about him in the book “Nyantri Bersama John Titaley; Menakar Teks, Menilai Sejarah dan Membangun Kemanusiaan Bersama”, most part of which elaborates Titaley’s thoughts about the existence of religion and its relationship with others through exposition of religion that is completely different from the current views believed by churches and priests in the plural country of Indonesia.

Indeed, it is inevitable to admit that pluralism is a global phenomenon (pluralism is a reality, yet it is also a belief). Such phenomenon was once “forecasted” by Wilfred Cantwell Smith during the 1960 era. Smith mentioned that people nowadays starts to reach out, not only they read about Hindu or Moslem, they also sit together for a coffee with people of Hindu or Moslem religion; live alongside them as their neighbors; work in the same workplace; play together; and even possibly allow their Christian kids to marry their neighbors of Hindu or Moslem religion(Paul F.Knitter, 2003:302).

Daniel Nuhamara, et all mentioned that pluralism is an attitude of accepting, respecting and viewing other religion as equally good and afferring the path of salvatian (2005:118-119). Horald A. Netland wrote, Salvation, enlightenment, liberation is said to be a reality in all mayor religious and no single religion can be considered somehow normative or superior to all others. All religions are their own way complex historically and culturally conditioned human

responses to the divine reality (2001:158). Therefore it is very important to respect between religions so as to create peace on this earth.

Walter Wink in his writings on Nonviolence "Peace is the Way" (transl. Nico A. Likumahuwa, 2009:15, 452-454) elaborates that violence existed throughout history, even Martin Luther King, Jr, before murdered said "the choice today is no longer between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence". Books, magazines, scientific journals have written various stories on violence; nazi, war, racism, nuclear weapons and even violence in the name of religion. In this writing, violence is said to be exposed in ideology network, which weakens the nonviolence ways (as mentioned before; Christian ideology). M.K Gandhi in the same compilation of writings expressed similar voice that suggests that nonviolence is the strongest power human can ever use, in which truth is the only goal, because God is the truth himself.

## **2 Result and Discussion**

In general, most churches in Palangka Raya are under the Kalimantan Evangelis (GKE), the largest and broadest denomination in Central Kalimantan, alongside other churches such as The Assemblies of God Church, The Tiberias Church, Indonesian Baptist Church, Toraja Church, Adventist Church, Simalungun Protestant Christian Church, Indonesian Evangelical Mission Church, Indonesian Christian Church, the Bethel Indonesia Rock church and many other church denominations. Out of these many churches in Palangka Raya, we only took samples from several churches, the most of which are of the Evangelical Church of Kalimantan (GKE) denomination, the Bethel Indonesian Rock church and Toraja church.

Our resources did not give the same respond to same sets of question, because we understand that they represent different backgrounds of denomination, such as Lutheran/Calvin and charismatic, as well as different educational background. We are fully aware that the answers to similar questions may differ greatly. We believe that this will not create any problems because the outcome of this research is to seek to understand how the Sacred Mandate is understood and related with the plural context of Indonesia.

We started with asking questions about the meaning of pluralism. Many of the respondents answered that pluralism is strongly related with diversity; the diversity in religion, ethnicity, race, etc; some respondents also answered that pluralism means more than one; the differences among people in Indonesia should not stop them from respecting and valuing others. Our respondents described the diversity in Indonesia as something positive, although many are wonder with the difficult situation lately, where religion could easily trigger conflicts, especially in the world where information technology is more advanced. Even through social media the hatred between religions seems real (from both scholar and ecclesiastical pastors).

The next question was related to the understanding in pastors/priests of other religion. Similarly, we received greatly varying answers. Some answered that every religions has equally good intentions, while some other view diversity as a positive way to show the decency of Christians. Other answers to this questions includes the opinion from some pastors that other religions are considered as our close 'neighbours' and therefore we have to respect and honour them, especially because religious diversity is something very common in Indonesia. Regardless of preferences, we have to learn to live alongside each other peacefully and build a good relationship with other followers of different religions (from scholar pastors and the pastor of GBI Rock).

The next question is about the needs to build relationships between religions, and most respondents answer that indeed it is necessary, while others answered that every people reserves the rights to choose which religion to follow. One of the respondents even mentioned that although he is a pastor, his siblings are of different religion and therefore it is impossible not to respect and love each other. Human beings are social creatures whose nature is to relate with others, so basically everyone should build positive relationship with each other. (a pastor from Toraja church).

The next question was on efforts or method to build relationships with other religion. The respondents answered that there are many ways to build positive relationships. Their answers were summarized as follows; to host joint religious activities, supporting religious harmonies through activities on religious holiday such as Christmas, Idul Fitri and Hindu events. Some of the respondents also mentioned about working together with other religious followers on general activities like women's group, mother and kids program, dancing courses, etc. Other respondents mentioned gotong royong (working together) and paying social visits to other religion. They also helped each other to support events like Pesparawi and MTQ, worked together to clean up churches or Christian cemetery. On different religious holiday like baik Idul Fitri, Christmas, Kaharingan (Hindu) people visits each other eagerly. They also support each other when there is community member in condolences, regardless their religion, in forms of financial, material and physical supports. Harmony makes life peaceful and tranquil and enhances spiritual activities. It is beautiful as there is no sense of envious or spiteful towards others. Harmony and peace are the goals of every religion which brings happiness to its followers, such happiness that extends to families, workspaces and spiritual environment. Where we live in harmony and peace, God is present.

Furthermore, the next question was on programs from the church that includes community in general, in a way that other religions can feel the benefits of the church program. One interesting answer came from the pastor of GBI Rock who said that their program is generally designed to include the community regardless their religious background. One of the activities in their program is establishing community market and distribution of basic groceries for poorer-off families of any religion. From several churches, they admitted that there is no specific program of such, but they occasionally hold similar program on special day. For example, on Pancasila day, the majority of churches in Palangka Raya came out to help cleaning mosques under the coordination of the Army. There was also agenda to visit Orphan House during Ramadhan, distribution of basic groceries and dinner with the orphans. At the Easter celebration, GPIB members came out to visit Orphan House belongs to other religion. The other respondent answered that they also came to support when there was fire disaster by distributing food, basic necessities, clothing and school stationeries, and giving money.

The next question was focused on inquiries about the understanding of the Sacred Mandate in Matthew 28:19-20. The pastor of GBI Rock answered that the Sacred Mandate refers to the word of Jesus to bring every nation become His disciple. Others answered that it means we have to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, not in a forceful way, but by showing kindness towards other religion. This way, we really show what the Sacred Mandate is all about. Other respondents also said that the Sacred Mandate is all about the word of salvation which was spread out after the resurrection Jesus, when the eleven apostles went to Galilea, the hill that Jesus showed them before. The Sacred Mandate is so important, not only because it is the ultimate mission of every church, but also because new churches may be established through people who obey it. One of the scholar pastors reminded that as we explore the passage, we have to look closely at the context at the time the book Matthew verse 28 was written, during which preaching was indeed necessary as it was the beginning of Christianity.

These answers from different pastors on their understanding of the Sacred Mandate is very interesting as they all have similar ring to the notion that the word of God should be spread out widely so everyone know about Jesus. All the answers were different from the answer from the scholar pastor because they view the mandate is to be reflected through practical life actions in order to bring people to believe in Jesus.

On the question about ways to preach the mandate, some respondents admitted that so far they only preach in church and through biblical exposition (the pastor of GerejaToraja). Another pastor also mentioned that in addition to preaching and exposition, showing examples from the newly-converted Christians can also be powerful way. The respondents from Lutheran church confirmed that these new Christians mostly converted because they married into Christian family as opposed to repent by gospel. Some admitted that they became Christians because they followed their home-stay family Palangka Raya, although many also said that they became Christian out of their own free will. From the pastors of GBI, they believe that preaching the word of God should be a lifestyle. This means that wherever they go they would always speak about Christ to everyone whenever available while teaching about other things of their expertise. The main point of this view is that they would like to express their gratitude for the love of God has been graced upon them, believing that Christ will complete them in their work for God.

The last question was about ways to avoid conflicts when preaching. At this point, the question was asked very carefully. A few of the pastors elaborated thoroughly on their opinion that preaching the word of God by churches or Christians is conforming what is mandated in the bible. There are so many pastors talk passionately about preaching, yet when it is related to questions about pluralism in Indonesia they seems to be somewhat lost in answers, because they view the program and kindness to support other religions is as nothing to do with preaching the gospel.

Some respondents answered that it is not necessary to do the act of preaching in Indonesia, because we don't want to recruit them as Christians, we want them to be the follower of Jesus Christ. Similarly, some other respondents said that Jesus Christ should be our way of life. The scholar pastors mentioned that it is not necessary to do preaching in Indonesia, because diversity is a gift from God, and therefore let God work on how every follower of religion practice their own religion. Kindness, respect and thoughtfulness towards others, as well as opting for justice and truth are already part of preaching gospel. Differently, the pastor of gereja Toraja said that being a Christian we should be wise as serpents and harmless as doves, which means that it is not necessary to carry out any radical acts in spreading the word of God to other religion. Christians should be able to show justice and truth universally in order to bring people to know and believe in God.

Although the answers varied from one respondent to the other, when asked about the meaning of preaching, every one of them similarly refer the human values that aim for peace in Indonesia.

### **3 Conclusion**

From the results of this research, it can be concluded that, first; preaching gospel (the sacred mandate) as written in Matthew 28:18-20 generally takes place in church in form of the exposition of gospel, in teaching the new Christians, and in spreading it to everyone. Second: the efforts taken by pastors in preaching the gospel as written in Matthew 28:18-20 are

generally in form of social activities, such as community markets, distribution of basic groceries for poorer-off people, cleaning religious house, visiting orphan house and break-fasting together during Ramadhan, and distribution of basic necessities, clothing, stationeries and money.

This proves that preaching is no longer viewed as radical movement, but more the act of love towards fellow human beings.

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