

## THE GREAT COMMISSION

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The first impression regarding a paper on this subject was that it was unnecessary for the select group gathering for this Congress. After long and serious deliberation there was a reversal of this initial impression. The need for a careful evaluation of the Great Commission is found in the fact that many Christians misunderstand what it meant when it was given, and how it relates to each individual and to each group of Christians. There is in the Christian community today a tendency to misinterpret or disregard the intention of Christ when he expressed the Great Commission.

This paper will deal with the Great Commission as found in Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:21-23 and Acts 1:8. All of these are seen as statements of the Lord Jesus Christ describing his intentions for his disciples in his world.

### *The basis of the Great Commission*

The content of the Great Commission is not an extra that is added as an afterthought at the conclusion of the life and teaching of Jesus. Rather its origin is in the nature of God himself. Since God is the one true God, all created things are his possession and under his dominion. Thus the worldwide scope included in the Great Commission is consistent with his essential nature. Also the essence of his being is love. That love is defined in simple grandeur in John 3:16 where its object is the world. And in John 1:29 Jesus is heralded as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world." Countless other references, such as II Cor. 5:19, I John 2:2, Eph. 1:8-11, 3:5-13; Col. 1:27-29; Acts 17:26, reveal that the one true God encompasses the entire universe through creation and through loving recreation in the death and resurrection of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Closely related to this concept, yet uniquely distinct from it, we find the Great Commission based on the authority of Jesus Christ. In one sense this is a repetition of the above emphasis, in that just as Jesus is one with God, everything that was said about the universal nature of God and his love for a world would be applicable to Jesus Christ. However, in a unique sense Jesus has the authority to commission his people to disciple all peoples.

This authority is based on his human experience in which as fully God and fully man he himself went forth to make disciples. Then through his sacrificial death with its resurrection quality, he demonstrated his eligibility for full authority. He carried out his divinely appointed mission as God's sacrifice for human sin, and by his own volition handed his soul back to God. In this divinely shrouded mystery he moved into the throne room of death, hell and Satan. He destroyed Satan's power,

removed death's frightening hold on humanity, and robbed hell of all who would believe on him as Savior. It was this Jesus who in quiet, supreme confidence could stand on the mount in Galilee and say to those who gathered there and to all who would gather to him throughout human history, "All authority is given unto me." This is the basis for the Great Commission.

The Great Commission is, however, rooted also in the condition of mankind. There are many things taught about man by those who rely on some form of human reasoning or religious ritual or scientific knowledge or psychological experimentation. But, according to the revelation of God, every human being is in a condition of separation from God. He is cut off from the only source of life. He is in the grip of death, being contaminated by sin, being hopelessly, helplessly dominated by Satan. This condition of humanity is another basis for the Great Commission.

### *The significance of the Great Commission*

It is important to recognize that the specific statements of the Great Commission were given during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ. Yet the various accounts do not add a new or unique truth to other teachings in the Scripture. In fact, as early as Gen. 12:3, we find the first specific indication that God's choosing of an individual from whom he would raise up a family, and ultimately a nation, was for the specific purpose of blessing all humanity. The truth is repeated throughout Scripture that God gives spiritual blessing in order that those blessed may be channels through which God can bless the maximum number of people.

It is clear that the concept of God's desire to reach all people and of his intention of using individuals whom he has chosen to reach these people is an early truth in Scripture. It is equally apparent that from the early time of God's sharing his purpose, man was given freedom to obey or disobey since he is a spiritual being created in the image of God himself. The fact of man needing forgiveness and the assurance of Christ's abiding presence is taught long before the giving of the Great Commission. Therefore, Jesus' repeated statement of this concept was not to teach new truth or communicate a new command or to describe a task that had not been defined previously. Rather it was a concise summary that would crystallize and make practical what the early disciples had experienced, learned, and felt. The fact that it was stated to the ten disciples who had gathered on the night of his resurrection is of importance. Both Luke's description (Luke 24:44-49) and John's statement (John 20:21) were taken from Jesus' first post-resurrection meeting with the ten apostles. Although undoubtedly he said many things that night, the Spirit of God laid on both of these a sense of divine importance that this must be recorded for Christ's people. Perhaps Mark's reference (16:15-16) is to that same night, although it may be referring to the following Sunday evening when Thomas was present. Matt. 28:18-20, which is commonly regarded as the classic expression of the Great Commission, was not stated on either of these meetings. This was said on the Mount in Galilee. Jesus referred to this prearranged meeting when he saw the women just after his resurrection. Perhaps this was the same gathering referred to in

I Cor. 15 where five hundred were in attendance. All we know that was recorded about this meeting was the commissioning of these who had gathered there to disciple the nations. It seems that the reference in Acts 1:8 was on the Mount of Olives on the day of the Lord's ascension, a full forty days after the resurrection.

In other words, the emphasis most frequently recorded of the teaching of Jesus immediately prior to his ascension was dealing with the Great Commission. It obviously was considered by our Lord and Master to be one of the most urgent emphases that he needed to leave with his disciples. He evidently felt that it was important to underscore this teaching through repetition. It is, so far as we know, the last thing he said before disappearing into heaven. If in his economy of words and careful use of time he placed this kind of significance on that teaching, then we should make every effort to fully understand and consistently practice that which he taught.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, there are other elements of significance. This sharply focused summation of what this group of followers was to do gave them an understandable and workable plan of action to translate to the world what Christ had done and taught. These words undoubtedly echoed in their hearts to focus their attention beyond the Jewish limitations that had attempted to contain the teachings of Christ. This clearly stated worldwide objective would be used of the Holy Spirit to break down their prejudices and to avoid their tendency to settle down in Jerusalem. It was the appropriate climactic note to the life and teachings of Jesus and the opening trumpet blast launching the newborn Christian fellowship toward the ends of the earth.

### *The meaning of the Great Commission*

Considerable emphasis has been given to the fact that in Matthew's statement the word "go" is in fact a participle. Difference of opinion comes as to whether this is a participle that has an imperative inherent in it, or whether it was simply a statement that as Christians were going they were to disciple the nations. Some have used this participle to insist that Jesus did not command his disciples to go. He did, they continue, command them to disciple the nations as they went. Whereas linguistically a case could be made for this viewpoint, it has some inherent dangers for the Christian community. Some would conclude that Jesus has never commanded us to go to all the world. He has simply said, if you happen to be going for some other reason, you ought to disciple the nations wherever you go. They thus have deleted from the teaching of Jesus a vital element and have diluted the Christian experience. Without arguing the particular verse in question, it would be wise to analyze the total biblical teaching and the experience of the Early Church.

An analysis of John 20:21 reveals Jesus sending each of us on the same mission on which his Father sent him. In Mark's Gospel the final statement given immediately prior to his ascension, the empowering of the Holy Spirit, is for the purpose of sending Christians to the ends of the earth. The very fact that the early followers were called the "sent forth ones" (from *apostello*) indicates that Jesus was committing his followers to a worldwide task. The whole experience in the book of Acts describes

without any question the fact that the early gathered community of Christians was a going-forth, discipling community rather than a community that just happened to go somewhere and disciple the nations. The early experience at Antioch indicated that under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Barnabas were set apart and sent forth. Although it may seem to be laboring the point, it does appear to be urgent that the Christian community never lose sight of the fact that the command to go to the ends of the earth is essential in the Christian experience and in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Some are sent forth under the command of Christ on a specific mission to disciple the nations.

It is also true, however, that the various versions of the Great Commission emphasize that every Christian is under this mandate. An error equally dangerous to that of not believing that anyone is commanded to go forth as detailed above, is that which says only a specified few who are called missionaries are sent to the ends of the earth. It is clear in the statements of the Great Commission that every Christian, wherever he is, is commanded to disciple others. The fact that out of the original eleven perhaps no more than one was really "at home" in Jerusalem, could suggest that the emphasis Jesus is making is not that we are to go to our homes to start, but that we are to be involved in discipling wherever we are when we commit ourselves to Christ. We are to continue discipling at every place he leads us. This is the privilege and obligation of every Christian and every gathered body of Christians who desire to be obedient to Jesus Christ. There is error built into the concept which suggests that this is a specialized instruction to those who would be involved in communicating Jesus Christ in cross-cultural boundaries which are popularly known as foreign missions. Nor is this a special restricted kind of order given to the ordained pastor or deacon or the one sent forth within the boundary of his own nation or his own community. This is the expression of Christ's will for every Christian and every group of Christians.

The meaning of this Commission also needs to be clarified at the point of whether it has within it a developmental or progressive concept. Was Jesus teaching that the Christians should fully meet the spiritual needs and fully disciple those in Jerusalem before they moved to Samaria, and culminate that task before they moved to Judaea, and finish that work before they moved to the ends of the earth?

Probably none in attendance at this conference is troubled with these misconceptions. However, it is remarkable that a number of Christians justify their involvement locally and their neglect of the rest of the world on the basis that "Jerusalem" has great need and they cannot spare personnel or resources for the rest of the world until they do a better job at home. It is instructive to note the experience of these first-generation Christians. Peter, who was called to work primarily among his own people, the Jews, was sent early in the Christian experience to Cornelius, a Gentile. Further affirmation is found in the fact that, whereas Paul became known as the apostle to the Gentiles, inevitably and invariably he communicated in the synagogue, to the Jewish people wherever he went before moving on into a Gentile community. By precept and example those who were nearest Christ demonstrated that all of the elements

regarding location or kinds of people to be disciplined were to be carried out simultaneously rather than sequentially. The Great Commission means that every Christian and every group of Christians is to be engaged simultaneously, discipling every kind of person living in every area of the world in each generation.

Further meaning is found in this command of Christ as he describes clearly the purpose of sending Christians. Either implied or stated in each of the expressions of his commissioning is an emphasis on the salvation of the lost world. In Matthew's Gospel, when he talks of discipling the nations and then baptizing them, there is implicit in that statement that they are first to turn from sin, become followers of Jesus, and then publicly identify themselves as Christians. In Mark's statement about going forth into all of the world and preaching the Gospel to every creature, the purpose is that they might believe and be saved. The sobering counterpart is that to disbelieve is to be condemned. In Luke's Gospel again the emphasis is given that repentance and remission of sin should be preached in Jesus' name beginning at Jerusalem and going out among all other nations. It was the witness to this truth that was laid upon the new Christian community. John's Gospel has an even more disturbing note. He states that as they went out to remit sin, the sins of these people would be remitted, but as they retained sins, the sins of those hearers would be retained. There are, of course, various viewpoints as to the meaning of these words.

The above reference could mean that as Christians are sent forth (in the manner and for the purpose Christ was sent), failure to bear witness will mean that the world has no witness and will retain their sins. But to bear a witness would mean that those believing would find their sins remitted. A variation of this interpretation is that those receiving the witness retain the freedom of choice. Upon hearing, those who refuse, retain their own sins; and those who believe find their sins remitted. The essential meaning is the same, although the emphasis shifts slightly between these two interpretations. Nevertheless, it is clear that the purpose of the sending forth was to save men from their sins.

It appears to be obvious, however, that a simple proclamation of the Gospel and an initial yes or no to Jesus Christ was not all that was included in the Great Commission. There is mention in both Matthew and Mark of the command to baptize. Although it does raise questions to read too much into terminology like this, it does have some implications. In the subsequent practice of the New Testament believers, the common experience was that baptism was related to a public acknowledgment of Jesus in the context of a Christian community. It seems that Jesus was emphasizing that his sending forth was not just to announce the Gospel in passing, but was also to minister to the new converts in such a way as to identify them with other Christians in their locality. This appears to mean that the charge of Jesus Christ is more inclusive than simply bearing a brief witness and moving on. However, there are some who feel committed to this type of ministry particularly in the light of a possible interpretation of Matt. 24:14. Yet it appears that the command to the whole body of Christians requires more than a seed-sowing ministry to fulfill the intention of the Lord's command.

Of course, the further emphasis in Matthew 28 urging the teaching of those disciplined to observe all things whatsoever Jesus had commanded certainly lays upon the followers of Christ a significant and heavy responsibility that will never be fully completed before the Lord does return.

Another meaning that seems to be an indispensable ingredient of the original Great Commission, but is implied rather than specifically stated, is the fact that this Commission was given to the gathered community of Christians as well as being incumbent on each individual believer. This is suggested by the fact that it was stated to the Christian community each time it was uttered. It is also evidenced in the succeeding practice of the newly-born Christian gatherings. To mention only one example would be to call attention to Acts 13 when the ecclesia at Antioch was instructed by the Holy Spirit and subsequently sent forth Paul and Barnabas on what has been referred to as their first missionary journey. Throughout the New Testament this appears to be the practice where the group felt the responsibility of sending forth and of supporting prayerfully and financially those who were sent.

The ecclesia gathered at Antioch, at Ephesus and Philippi are representative of others who participated in the sending forth of called-out ones as the Holy Spirit moved among them. This reveals first of all that when the Gospel is preached and individuals are won, they will be drawn by the Holy Spirit into a fellowship which we call the ecclesia of Jesus Christ. It appears clear also that these original fellowships felt there was a responsibility laid on them to be involved in the carrying out of the Commission of Jesus Christ. Not only by example, but by teaching as reflected in Ephesians 3, we draw these conclusions. In Eph. 3:5-12 we see Paul indicating that the mystery of God had revealed that by the proclamation of the Gospel the Gentiles (the peoples) would be brought into union and fellowship with the original chosen people of God. He goes on to explain that Paul was made a minister of this Gospel, but clarifies it in verse 10 that it is through the ecclesia of God that this mysterious working will be demonstrated not only to the world but to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. It seems evident, therefore, that the Great Commission lays a command and responsibility on the gathered Christian community as well as the individual believer.

This leads to another strong and clear teaching of the New Testament that may have been lost in modern times. There is error in the minds of many regarding the mission privilege of the newly gathered ecclesia. There are many who mistakenly believe that a Christian community that is still young and without many material resources should not be expected to be involved in witness to the uttermost parts of the earth. This is a contemporary distortion of the Gospel. The clear teaching of the New Testament is that from the initial gathering of a group into a fellowship which we call the ecclesia of Jesus Christ, that group was reaching out into its own Jerusalem, further to its own Samaria, past its own Judaea to the uttermost parts of the earth. Through the prayers recorded in the New Testament, through the going forth of the early Christians, through the setting apart of those to go out and the support in prayer and finances, it is without question a fact that from the first the

New Testament ecclesia felt a divine obligation to be obedient to the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone today to imply, to suggest, or to teach that Christian communities of recent birth should not be faced with the clear privilege and responsibility of a worldwide ministry is to rob them of a part of their inheritance in Jesus Christ. Every Christian community is at its inception to be involved in obedience to the Great Commission.

On the opposite end of the spectrum are those Christian groups who are saying that since there are growing bands of Christians in countries that have been historically the place to which they have sent missionaries, their responsibility has now been removed, and that they are only to respond to the invitation of the Christians in a given locality. This is also contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. The Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ has not been revoked or withdrawn. Even if one percent or five and ten percent of the population becomes Christian, there is no scriptural base for a Christian community to withdraw from that arena, waiting for an invitation by this emerging Christian body. Certainly Christian courtesy and spiritual wisdom must be exercised. Naturally, cooperation and joint planning have great advantage, but the command to disciple the nations is still incumbent on every existing community. The total Christian community must continue to be aggressively involved in worldwide mission endeavor until the Lord returns.

#### *The assurance in the Great Commission*

As best we can read the early record, the largest number who heard Jesus give the Great Commission was 500 people. In the light of all of the powers and forces in the world today, it seems almost ludicrous that he would have the audacity to say to that handful of people, "Disciple every creature throughout all the earth." Yet other than the specific command, there are two elements that changed the total atmosphere in the proclaiming of the Great Commission. As was mentioned earlier, the basis for it was declared to be the authority of God in Jesus Christ and all of the power in heaven and on earth. But in four of the five statements referred to in the introduction (Mark being the exception), there is another specific element. In each of these, reference is made to the Holy Spirit as being inbreathed into the followers of Jesus Christ in order to provide the personal, immediate power of the Godhead as the active agent in accomplishing the plan and purpose of God in this world. Whereas this could be pursued in each of the accounts, John will be our focus. He describes the sending forth of Christians as being on the same basis that Jesus Christ was sent forth from God. His was a unique incarnation, a mystery that still defies clear understanding. Yet Jesus seems to be saying: Just as I had resident within my human body the presence and power of God, so you, as you go forth into this world, have the responsibility of wrapping your bodies around the divine presence and power of God. Implied in this and clarified in other teaching is the fact that just as Jesus was crucified, so the individual believer must deny himself and get up on his cross daily and die in order that the Holy Spirit may live fully and freely in controlling power in his life. It is only through the indwelling of the living God that the Great Commission becomes reasonable.

It may well be that the failure of the Christian community to go to the ends of the earth and disciple the nations has been more at this point than at any other. Perhaps it has not been that the Christian community has failed to understand the command. Perhaps it has not been that the Christian community deliberately ignored or neglected or disobeyed the command that they understood. It may be that the lack of fulfillment of the Great Commission has been at the point of a blurred understanding of how it was to be done. Some have tried diligently and earnestly through careful planning and promotion and publicity to carry on extensive evangelistic crusades and witnessing programs. Some have given themselves and considerable resources to mass media either in terms of radio and television or of printed material in various forms. Some have grasped education, either of the masses in secular education or of the leadership of the Christian community through theological education, and have attempted to comply with the Great Commission in these terms. Others have sought through various service ministries of healing or of feeding the hungry or of housing the homeless to communicate the Gospel to the world. None of these things is bad. Neither is any of them the full and complete intention of the Great Commission.

The biblical teaching is that the intention of Jesus Christ as stated in this command only becomes a possibility through the power and indwelling presence of his Holy Spirit. It is probably accurate to affirm that if the Holy Spirit controls and fully indwells and empowers the life of Christians who have the restraining teaching of God's Word as their guideline, the Christian community will without question fulfill this imperative of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It may be equally accurate to say that when this command is not fulfilled, there is a lack of the full empowering of the Holy Spirit.

It needs to be kept in sharp focus that what is being discussed is not some scheme flowing out of the creative intellect of humanity. What is being discussed is something that flowed from the heart of God from all eternity. The Great Commission describes a work that is based on the very nature and authority of the living God. It describes his work. It involves his called-out and sent-forth people. It is effected through his indwelling personal presence. It has as its objective his world and his created peoples made in his own image.

As Jesus closed the Great Commission in Matthew, he promised his immediate personal presence until the consummation of human history. He did not use the term "until the end of the age" as though time was going to dribble away. Not as if the spring of the universe would become weak and wind down, and power would finally be no more. He used the term rather in an ascending concept. He indicated that his power working fully and freely in this world would bring humanity to the culmination and consummation of its history in the fullness and presence of the power of Jesus Christ. He promised his abiding presence. Yet it could be affirmed that his abiding presence was promised on the basis of obedience to his Great Commission. It just might be true that those of his people who are not obedient to his command have forfeited at least the awareness and perhaps the fullness of the abiding presence of Jesus Christ which he promised. But there are many who are clear in their un-

derstanding, and faithful in their obedience. They have died to self and know the power of the indwelling Christ. Through them the nations will be disciplined. Christ is with them until the consummation of this age.