

WHAT IS THE GREAT COMMISSION?

An Article by Mark Paynter ThD.

INTRODUCTION

After the resurrection and before the Ascension Jesus gave his followers what has become known as the great commission. Through the great commission He called upon his followers to participate in the same ministry that he himself had engaged in. A careful study of Scripture shows that Jesus gave the church the great commission on five separate occasions. On each of these occasions the Lord added an aspect that clarified each of the previous statements that he had made.

JOHN 20:19-23

Historically speaking the first occasion Jesus gave the great commission was when he first appeared to the disciples after his resurrection at Jerusalem. At that time Jesus appeared only to ten of the disciples, Thomas was absent. This account is found in John 20:19-23. John reveals that the disciples at that time were hiding behind closed doors in fear of the Jewish authorities who had arranged the crucifixion of their master. When Jesus appears to them his first concern was to speak peace into their hearts, before showing them his hands and feet as proof that he had risen from the dead.

Once the disciples had received peace from the Lord, Jesus was able to instruct His disciples with the words "Peace be unto you, as the Father has sent me, I also send you" (John 20:21). In the same way that Jesus had come into this world sent by the Father, so Jesus in turn sends His disciples out into the world to represent Him just as He represents the Father. It has been well said that God the Father only had one son, and He made that Son a missionary. God the Father sent the Son into the world on a mission. That mission was to redeem the lost and herald the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Throughout history the Lord has desired for his church to participate in carrying out this mission through his church in every generation since that time. John 20:22 makes it clear that Jesus did not

expect that this mission would be carried out in the disciples own strength but rather in the strength of the Holy Spirit who Jesus now breathed upon them. This breathing out of the Holy Spirit in the passage under consideration was only a partial infilling in anticipation of the much greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It is the Holy Spirit who today continues to abide with those who follow Christ and releases his anointing to them in order that they might carry out the mission of Christ.

MARK 16:14-18

John Mark in Mark 16:14-18 provides the details of the second occasion when Jesus issued the great commission. This announcement occurs a week later in the upper room, Thomas is now with the disciples. Jesus on the first occasion commissioned the disciples to be his representatives, to actively carry out the same mission that he had engaged in. In the second announcement Jesus identifies two hindrances to engaging in the great commission before calling his disciples to a preaching ministry. Jesus rebukes the disciples for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they did not believe that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. This unbelief and hardness of heart can be traced to the misinterpretation of Jesus words and of Scripture, Jesus had warned his disciples on many occasions that he would be put to death and later rise from the dead but his disciples refused to believe the words that he spoke. Instead of accepting the Messiah as a suffering servant they thought in terms of a conquering king, instead of thinking of a spiritual kingdom they sought a physical kingdom.¹ One in which the Jewish people would be freed from Roman rule

In Marks account, once Jesus had rebuked them for their hardness of heart he then issues the second version of the great commission. In his announcement he considerably expands upon what he had previously said by identifying the sphere, the means and the message of the great commission.

¹ Preachers Outline Study Bible commentary on Mark 16:14

- 1) **The sphere** of the commission is the entire world and to every creature. Such is God's love for the world that no part of the world is to be excluded from hearing Christ's message.
- 2) **The means** through which the great commission is to be accomplished is preaching.
- 3) **The message** that was to be preached was the Gospel. Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the Gospel without compromise or supplement. The apostle Paul stated the essential message of the Gospel when he wrote "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:4).

In Mark 16: 16 Jesus makes it clear that those who accept the message of the Gospel through the preaching of the Word will go on to be baptized as evidence of their belief.

It is important that we realize in His second announcement of the great commission Jesus associated belief with supernatural power. In fact supernatural power is given to the disciples to enable them to walk through the difficult circumstances of life in confidence and peace knowing that the Lord is with them. This power is demonstrated through casting out of demons, speaking in new tongues, divine protection from serpents and poison and the ability to lay hands on the sick and see them recover (Mark 16:17-18).

MATTHEW 28:16-20

The third time Jesus announces the great commission is more than two weeks later on a mountain top in Galilee where Jesus had prearranged to meet with his followers (Matt 28:16-20). Jesus approaches the disciples and points out to them that he had received all authority. In Greek the word used is *exousia* and carries the meaning of either the capability or right to do a certain thing without hindrance. Jesus declares that he had been given all authority in heaven and earth. The authority Jesus spoke of is the right to exercise power. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew has emphasized the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus taught with authority (Matt 7:29), exercised the

power to forgive sins (Matt 9:6) delegated power to the disciples to drive out demons (Matt 10:1)

However after his death and resurrection he enters into a new level of authority, an authority as head of a new creation.

The Apostle Paul in Philippians 2: 8-9 states that the reason Jesus has been exalted to this highest level of authority is because he was first willing to humble himself and be obedient to the Fathers will even to the extent of dying upon the cross. Jesus has authority over all of humanity to grant eternal life to all who the father gives him (John 17:2) Jesus is the one who was crucified on behalf of humanity, the first to permanently rise from the dead and therefore is one who is preeminent in all things. He is the one through whom all things were created and for whom all things were created. Through Jesus all things continue to exist. Through the cross Christ has reconciled all things to Himself and through him they enter into harmony (Col 1:15-20)

Having obtained this new level of authority, Jesus now commands his disciples to “Go, therefore and make disciples.” (Matt 28:18). In the Greek the English word translated “Go” is the *“poreuomai”* and carries the meaning as you are pursuing the journey you are currently on go about² The actual command Jesus is giving focuses upon the Greek word “matheteuo” and means to make disciples. Dr Tom Constables has pointed out that

In the Greek text there is one imperative verb, “make disciples” (Gr. matheteusate), modified by three participles, “going,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” This does not mean that we should make disciples wherever we may happen to go. The participle “going” is not just circumstantial, but it has some imperatival force. In other words, Jesus commanded His disciple to reach out to unreached people to make disciples, not just to make disciples among those with whom they happened to come in contact.³

Jesus identified two primary means through which His followers would make fellow disciples. Jesus two fold strategy consisted of (1) Baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit those who positively respond to the gospel. This baptism was identification with Christ in His

² Strong, The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible Word Study G4198.

³Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible commentary on Mt 28:19.

death and resurrection. (2) Teaching - Those who follow Christ are to be taught the things that that he commanded. These things are taught in order that those who follow Christ may learn, know and ultimately obey everything our Lord taught. Macdonald and Farstad in their commentary point out that the commission extends beyond evangelism and the making of converts, for those who come to Christ must be taught to obey his commandments. The goal of all such instruction is to enable those been disciplined to become like the master.⁴ This teaching aspect of the great commission means that it not sufficient to bring a person into relationship with Christ, our Lord's commission not only included a command to lead people to believe in Christ but a command to make disciples. This goal of making disciples must be at the center of all that a church does; the church is to have at its heart the intention to make disciples.

In Matthew 28:19-20 passage Jesus reiterated that the sphere in which the followers of Christ would make disciples was the world. The Greek word used here is the word ἔθνος “ethnos” and carries the meaning of a multitude of people, race or ethnicity belonging together.⁵ Jesus was in effect extending his ministry beyond the boundaries of Israel to every ethnic group to be found on planet earth throughout the ages.

Matthew closes his account of the Great Commission by pointing out that Jesus assured the recipients of the Great Commission that he would be with them, even unto the end of the World.

LUKE 24:46-49

The fourth announcement of the great commission is found in Luke 24:46-49. In issuing this statement Jesus related the great commission to the Old Testament foretelling of the Messiahs suffering, death and resurrection. The disciples had witnessed that in Christ the Scriptures had been fulfilled therefore they were to preach the message of repentance and remission of sins to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. The Greek word translated “repentance” in English is “*metanoia*” and means

⁴ MacDonald and Farstad commentary on Matthew 28:20

⁵ Derived from Zodhiates S.Word Study G1484.

to change ones mind concerning a purpose or action that one has done.⁶ The Preachers Outline Study Bible defines repentance as “a turning away from sin and turning toward God. It is a change of mind, a forsaking of sin. It is putting sin out of one’s thoughts and behavior. It is resolving never to think or do a thing again.”⁷ Repentance is more than just changing one’s mind concerning former actions it requires a change in the inner heart. Repentance in fact requires two turns, the first a reversal of mind from one’s former inner thoughts and attitudes and their outward expression in life and secondly a positive turn towards God. Furthermore “Repentance is both the change of mind and the actual turning of one’s life away from sin and toward God “⁸ Jesus began his ministry by announcing the Kingdom of God and calling people to repentance (Matthew 3:2). Refusing to repent has eternal consequences (Luke 13: 2-3) However through repentance and baptism sin is removed and one receives the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) Repentance and conversions result in sin been blotted out and times of refreshing coming from the presence of the Lord (Acts 3:19) Repentance leads to the thoughts of the heart been forgiven (Acts 8:22). True repentance is accompanied with works that are consistent with that repentance and give evidence to it (Acts 26:20)

In relation to the last point Adam Clarke observes that not only were the disciples to be witnesses of the fact that Christ has suffered, died and been resurrected from the dead in fulfillment of the Scriptures but they were also to attest to fact that Jesus had power to

Open the understanding by the inspiration of his Spirit, that he gives repentance, that he pardons sin, and purifies from all unrighteousness, and that he is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come unto the knowledge of the truth and be saved. And these are the things of which their successors in the Gospel ministry must bear witness. As far as a man steadily and affectionately proclaims these doctrines, so far God will bless his labor to the salvation of those who hear him. But no man can with any propriety bear witness of that grace that saves the soul, whose own soul is not saved by that grace.⁹

6 Derived James Strong Word Study G3341

7 Preachers Outline Study Bible commentary on Acts 17:29-30

8 Preachers Outline Study Bible commentary on Acts 17:29-30

9 Adam Clarke’s Commentary on The New Testament commentary Luke 24:47

The responsibility of carrying this message of repentance and remission of sins to the nations was not something that the disciples could achieve in their own strength, so our Lord promised His disciples that they would be endowed with power from on high when they received the promise of the Father. Only a short while ago the audience Jesus was addressing had been hiding for fear of their lives, now He tells them that they shall receive power to be witnesses of his throughout the world. Obviously this could not be carried out under their own strength therefore enabling power from heaven would be given to them. If the disciples were to succeed in their mission they needed the power of the Holy Spirit.

ACTS 1:8

The fifth and final announcement in which Jesus issued the great commission is immediately prior to his ascension. In a rather dramatic statement Jesus promised his followers that they “shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) This verse contains three elements that I believe are important for us to understand.

Firstly Jesus clearly reiterated that the power to obey the great commission does not reside in Jesus’ followers but in the person of the Holy Spirit. Jesus promised His disciples that the very same Spirit that had dwelt in him would dwell in them. Jesus promised the disciples that the Holy Spirit would dwell in them along with his power. In the Greek the word for “power” is “dunamis”, what Jesus was in effect promising his disciples was that the same source that had enabled him to perform miracles would be available to them so that after His ascension they would be able to carry out his purposes. The source of this ability was the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon the early believers as an equipping power.

Secondly Jesus clearly taught that the major purpose for this equipping was that they might be witnesses of Jesus. The major reason why they are able to witness is the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. It is important to note that the actual Greek word for “witness” used in Acts 1:8 is “*Martus*” from which we derive the word “martyr.” It is sobering to think that one’s obedience to

Christ's commands may actually result in the loss of one's very life. But if we are truly going to be his disciples it may in fact involve the laying down of our very lives. Acts 1:8 is the central verse of the entire book of Acts, the rest of the book is a witness to the early churches faithfulness and obedience to the Lord's command.

Thirdly Jesus specified the strategy through which they were to accomplish this mission. The original hearers of these words were to be witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the world. For us who are alive today the strategy remains the same. Firstly we are to witness where we are, then move progressively outwards until we have reached the uttermost parts of the world.

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