

Text: Matthew 28:18-20

Title: The Great Commission

Truth: Christians are responsible to propagate faith in Jesus Christ.

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Introduction

We begin with the illustration of a dangerous Coast Guard rescue operation in the howling winds off the Alaska coast. Connecting this to the Great Commission, we need to see the church and her mission as the same kind of operation—rescuing people who are in mortal danger.

What is the “Great Commission”? Those words do not appear in these verses. In fact, if you search the entire Bible for it, you will not find the phrase! It is name commonly given by Christians to the last instructions of Jesus before the ascension. In it, He commanded His disciples to multiply followers of Jesus throughout the world. They were to baptize these new followers and train them to keep all that Jesus commanded to them.

From the book of Acts, we understand that this is to be carried out in the context of churches in every locale where believers gather to worship, receive instruction, fellowship, and work to carry the Great Commission forward in evangelism and church planting. It is in these local gatherings for worship that baptism and the Lord’s Table happen, where regular instruction happens, and where all the functions of the work of God are centered.

Since the Great Commission command is part of the “all things,” that we must keep, we immediately understand that we too are responsible to carry forward the work of Jesus in the world in the same manner as the first disciples.

It would serve us well to read all the portions of the Great Commission and a bit of the surrounding context (Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:46-53; John 20:21-23 and 21:15-19; Acts 1:2-11). I do not include all of the text in my handout because there are some

things that do not seem pertinent, like doubting Thomas.¹ I have included some things that *you* may not think are pertinent. But I wonder...particularly about the John 21 passage where the Lord indicates that caring for God’s sheep and persecution will be part and parcel of the future work of the church. He also taught about the kingdom of God as well as the resources attending the disciples in carrying out the Great Commission.

I. Foundation of the Great Commission

Matthew 28:18—All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

- A. According to BDAG, *authority* is a word that speaks of the right to control something or command it. It is absolute power. It is governing power, directive power. It gives Jesus the right to command people to do things.
- B. Ponder this: *all authority!* The Devil had offered Jesus approximately this kind of authority in Matthew 4:8-9—at least he thought he could offer it. But Jesus did not grasp that power in a wrong way and before His time. Now, God the Father has handed over the “keys of the kingdom,” so to speak, to Jesus. He was then and still is today the king of heaven and earth. Although He is not physically present here, he is waiting for His enemies to be subdued, at which time He will return (Psalm 110:1, Heb. 10:13).
- C. We obviously do not put the other co-equal members of the Godhead, namely the Father and the Spirit, into competition with Jesus the Son of God., as if He has more power than them. It seems that God the Father is the agent of the passive verb “has been given” and so He is the One from whom Jesus received all authority. There is no authority above or outside of Jesus.
- D. Simply put, He is the sovereign. He is the supreme ruler, the monarch, the emperor. He has supreme, ultimate power.
- E. He is Lord. The entire Lordship debate that has engulfed evangelicalism in the last two generations is put in its place by our Lord’s statement. Obviously, “being perfect” or “doing works of

¹ See the website fbcaa.org/docs, date Feb 26/2023 for the document.

submission to Christ” is not required to be saved, because salvation is by grace through faith. That entire idea is off the table before the discussion even begins. But believing Christ is Lord and submitting to Him as such are also obvious. When we enter into eternal life in this life, we acknowledge Jesus as Lord (Rom. 10:9). He *is* that. He is master. He is not less than that. He is *more* than that too, as we discovered a few months ago. He is the Christian’s *friend*. But He is far more than a friend. Christians follow Him as leader. Believers are under Him as head of the body.

F. I think this whole controversy arose because American evangelicalism became accustomed to a “soft” or “warm and fuzzy” gospel. When some Christians began then to speak Biblical language like repentance and Lordship of Christ, this offended the easy-going gospel of comfort or social action that was offered in much of the wider “church.” There was little emphasis on repentance or the fact that Jesus is King and Lord, and more focus on “accepting Jesus into your heart” and obtaining fire insurance. But that idea does not occur in Scripture. Certainly there is the text, “come unto me, all you labor and are heavy laden.” But that is in the context of language like this:

1. Mark 1:15 – repent and believe in the gospel
2. Acts 17:30 – “God commands all people everywhere to repent because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained.”
3. Matthew 4:17 – repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
4. Romans 10:9 – confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead.
5. John 8:24 – if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.

All of this is a matter of authority. You must abandon your self-authority and come under God’s authority.

G. He is exalted above all things, seated at the right hand of God. Acts 2:33, 5:31, Eph. 1:20. Heb. 8:1, Phil. 2:9-11.

H. Jesus's authority is foundational to the Great Commission. His authority has several implications for why we do the Great Commission, the manner in which we carry it out, and how it is to be received.

1. It demonstrates why we must listen to what Jesus says and do what He commands. The gospel of grace is not command-less. There are imperatives—there is *law*. Jesus is King-in-waiting, He is *our* ruler, and He has given us marching orders. There are certain things that are out of line and prohibited to the Christian; other things are expected. In fact, there are certain things that are out of line for *every* human being, and each one will be called to account for those things, whether speech or action or attitude.
2. His authority creates a stewardship assignment, or more simply, a job. Because Jesus is Lord, and sovereign, and possesses all authority, what He tells us to do is like what He told the apostles in Acts 1:2—He gave *commandments* to them. This forms a stewardship for us, a responsibility to carry out instructions of our master. One definition of stewardship is “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care” (Merriam-Webster). We have a job, and we must not do it in a slipshod or lazy or half-baked manner. By the way, *slipshod* means work that is done without care, thought, or organization. I wonder: are you and I are working the Great Commission with a lot of care, thought, and organization?
3. Jesus's authority creates for us a *delegated* authority. For example, we have the authority to proclaim a message of salvation and judgment, because Jesus gave that message to us, and it arises out of his all-encompassing authority. This delegated authority is derivative because if our audience does not hear us, then it is not hearing Jesus. Jesus is ministering through His church and so His authority goes along with that.

An important idea in this is that of forgiving and retaining sin (John 20:23). This sounds strange to our ears, but it is ratification language. God has informed the church as to His evaluation of things, and authorized the church to make

proclamations of what is already true. If you believe the gospel, your sins are forgiven. That is a truth settled in heaven and we can give it to people. If you do not believe the gospel, you still carry around the weight of your own sin and are not forgiven. We say that on the basis of Jesus's authority.

Similar language is used in Matthew 16:19 and 18:18. These texts record Jesus speaking about keys, and things bound on earth being bound in heaven, and similarly things loosed on earth loosed in heaven. The issue is one of authority, and Jesus has delivered that to the church. The church that is rightly operating and carefully handling sin in accordance with the Bible is delegated the authority to state whether someone's sins are forgiven or not.

Obviously, this is a "power" that can be misused—just like all authorities or powers can be misused. Some churches fail on the "rightly operating" portion and others on the "carefully handling" portion.

But it becomes rather obvious when there is a clear violation of Scriptural teaching without repentance. If there is no repentance, there likely has not been any confession of sin either. Without those ingredients, there is no forgiveness. Remember, if we confess, He is faithful and just to forgive. But without confession, you are showing that you are of a mind to not care about the sin. In such a case, it is easy to see how the church is not extending itself beyond its authority to call a sin a sin. Let that sink in—there are sins that people do, evening professing believers—which are "hanging over the head" of the perpetrator in an unforgiven state. That is terrible.

4. Jesus's authority means that His gospel is incumbent—a necessary duty—for all of creation. All of humanity is subject to His requests, His demands, His orders. Kings and all who are in authority as well as farmers and servants, both great and small, have the obligation to respond to the good news about Jesus. They have the obligation to attend carefully to His words. If they do not, *that itself* is a violation of the law of God. It is in fact rebellion against God, and we need to someone help people see

that. It is very bad to ignore God. Listen—it is bad enough to ignore another person who is talking to you, or who has written to you. To give that treatment to *God* is a high offense.

In theology, this idea has been given a name: “duty faith.” This means that “it is the duty of all who hear the gospel to savingly believe in Christ.”² That is an accurate description of our situation as humans. (I am most definitely *not* an Arminian. Hyper-Calvinists suggest that duty faith is an Arminian idea. Instead, it is a *Biblical* idea. See above, I.F. for some texts that show this is clearly the case.) Any *command* to repent and believe in Jesus shows this. A command is an expression of the will of God that runs right smack into your will. Indeed, God is *telling* you what to do.

II. Assignment of the Great Commission

Matthew 28:19-20—Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;

A. **Go therefore.** The connector *therefore* indicates that the command is based on the sovereign, all-encompassing authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am going to leap-frog the debate about whether this is an attendant circumstance participle indicating a command or a temporal participle indicating the time (translated, “as you go”). I think some people have inclined toward the latter view for grammatical reasons, not necessarily to reduce the “command flavor” of the “go” verb, but that is the end effect. It excuses a large class of people from even considering doing the Great Commission.

Whatever the case, it is clearly a responsibility of the church as a whole and of disciples as individuals. For the disciples, they had to get out of the immediate environs of Jerusalem, and the book of

² C. D. Daniel, “Hyper-Calvinism,” ed. Martin Davie et al., *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic* (London; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; InterVarsity Press, 2016), 432.

Acts shows that they did this eventually. Acts 1:8 explains the command in their context: “you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” We see that movement in Acts from Jerusalem:

1. Acts 8:1, 4-8 show how the gospel reached Judea and Samaria.
2. Acts 8:20 shows how the message reached Ethiopia.
3. Acts 10:24 shows the movement of the gospel to Caesarea north of Samaria.
4. Acts 13 explains the beginning of the first missionary outreach of the fledgling church...and the remainder of the book shows the gospel moving out to Cyprus, and modern-day Turkey, and Greece and into Europe, and then to Rome, with Paul’s further plans to go to Spain (Rom. 15:24, 28).

The Bible teaches both by instruction and by example. The early church was certainly the example of the general pattern of how to do God’s work. Proclaim the good news, make disciples, plant churches, set up leadership in those churches, strengthen the churches, and let the churches carry on the work in their local area.

Today, some go as a vocation (*not* a vacation—a full-time calling) and others do not. Some go far and others stay near. But it is certain that we are all going somewhere and doing something. And we should all be supporting this endeavor in some way, by supporting missionaries. We cannot be satisfied that if our church supports some missionaries with our finances and occasional prayers, then somehow we can wipe our hands of a more personal involvement in the Great Commission. What is *your* part? Have you prayed about that very question in any serious way?

Christians have spread out throughout the world, and should spread out farther yet. As we do that, we bring with us the most precious thing we have—the gospel of Jesus Christ—and our most important relationship. We share Him, and in sharing Him, you lose none of Him because He is infinite and indivisible.

Someone has correctly said that the question is not “Should I go?” but rather “Should I stay?” We pick “stay” as the default because it

is comfortable; then we expect a special calling to go, or more likely we do not even consider such a calling. But the Great Commission *is* that calling, and it is not so special in the sense that all Christians are automatically enlisted. The only question is your role in the war, not whether you are involved or not!

Consider the history of our church with regular missionary endeavors from the 1980s to early 2000s in South Africa and other places, as well as a focus on South America since 2008. As I recall, two missionaries were sent out in the early 1990s. Several other pastors, missionaries, and Bible teachers went through our church on their way to their present ministry calling. About 11 years ago a church plant started and since that time fully supported and operational. In the last five years a volunteer team has had the blessing of being involved in preserving and publishing the Scriptures. It is time for more of us to jump in with both feet and consider how we can push forward the work of ministry both here in Ann Arbor and abroad. We have an opportunity to “go” by helping our assistant pastor and his family to grow and prepare. Each and every one of us needs to deeply consider how we can be used of the Lord in going to people with the life-giving message.

B. Make Disciples. The second part of the Great Commission is the main verb of our Lord’s sentence. The verb usually means to **be** a disciple, but in the imperative it means to **make** or **become** a disciple. What exactly does this mean? We learned years ago in our church that it means, “Get them to believe in Christ.” Remember, Christian belief is into Jesus, not into generic spirituality or “belief in something/anything at all.” The “getting them to believe” is not by force or compulsion or manipulation. It is not just by fear tactics that emphasize what you are saved *from* but must be focused on what you are saved *to*. The intended meaning is to *convince* or *urge* people to become followers of Jesus.

1. The Lord expresses the direction toward which we invest our effort in this endeavor. He says to make disciples of all the nations. That is not a specific reference to the nearly 200 countries in the world, although we could think of it that way. It is more accurate to think of this as a reference to every ethnic group in the world, and there are far more than 200 such groups

of people. It would be better to think of “ethnic groups” as approximately the same as “language groups.” There are thousands of language. Even though those terms are not synonymous, the count of languages gives you a much more accurate estimation of the size of the task of reaching all ethnic groups. In fact, there are 7,000 languages. 75% percent of those languages, about 5,500, do not have a full Bible. This is 20% of the world’s population. About half of the total have some portion of Scripture. But far more have not been reached with the gospel.

2. In Ann Arbor and in the surrounding areas, we have a nearly unlimited “customer base”—as I sometimes jokingly refer to it. In Washtenaw County alone there reside nearly 370,000 souls. Many of the “nations” of the world come to us. We have freedoms to make disciples among people from the Middle East, or Far Eastern nations, or those from the 10/40 window, without much hindrance here in the States. That is not to say there is no opposition, for wherever God’s work is, there will almost always be opposition of some sort. There will be subtle things against the Word, and openly hostile things against God’s people, and disparate treatment and unfair things. We are simply to overcome those things, or side-step them, and continue on ministering the gospel to the lost.
3. Actually, making disciples is not a task that is done in a moment. Certainly, spiritual life starts at a particular time. But as wonderful as it is at the start, it is immature and needs growth, training, nourishment, etc. These advancements are accomplished in conjunction with two other activities which are stated next in the Great Commission. But we must recognize that once someone believes, *that is only the beginning*. We need then to work with one another to perfect and mature our following of the Lord. Do you remember how the Lord worked with the 12 for 3+ years? Let me ask you this question: who are you helping to become a better disciple? And who is helping you to become a better disciple? There could be several names that come to mind, but if there are zero names, that is a problem. There should be at least two and probably more if we are

casting the widest net possible including your church teachers and pastors.

4. We make disciples by giving people the truth of the gospel. Because eternal life is knowing God and His Son (17:3), we must introduce *Him* to *them* or *them* to *Him*, however you want to think about it. We need to put people in contact with God, and this happens by the souls of those people being informed about their standing before God and God’s loving concern for them displayed in the work of Jesus Christ. They must know that there is a way to heaven—*one* way—and they can be on that way by turning to Christ from their sins.
5. If we plant zero seed, guess how much fruit we will get? Basically, we would correctly guess zero. Surprisingly, we may get a *little bit* more than zero, because of the truth of John 4:38. Sometimes we are blessed to enter into the labors of others and reap where we have not sown. But this should not be the usual case. We need to pray that God will help us sow, and that He will bring us fruit, and that we will be ready to do ongoing discipleship work with those new disciples.

Matthew 28:19-20—Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**,²⁰ teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;

C. **Baptize.** It is interesting that if a person is a disciple, that means they are followers of Jesus. And followers will...follow...Jesus. So if Jesus commands them to do something, they will do it. Said another way, you cannot be a follower of Jesus without following Jesus.

A first step of following Jesus, and one with out-sized importance compared to the brief amount of time it takes, is to be baptized in obedience to His command here in the Great Commission. This is kind of a “gating function” to the rest of the Christian life and disciplines. For example, to have a person claim to be a follower of Christ who wishes to take the Lord’s Table but not be baptized is not a situation envisioned in any positive way in the Scriptures. If

often is the “watershed” (pun intended) at which the reality of someone’s faith is tested. If real, they will be baptized. If not, they will balk and somehow avoid it. I am not talking about those who want to be baptized with a different method.

In fact, an “unbaptized Christian” would then have been considered an oxymoron or contradiction in terms. According to Grammarly, “An oxymoron is a figure of speech that combines contradictory words with opposing meanings.” Unbaptized people are not Christians. *Christians* are baptized. These two ideas cannot be melded together into a workable alloy. It is a severe inconsistency. Of course, we make room for edge cases like the thief on the cross or others who are truly unable to be baptized for whatever reason. (That’s a fairly rare circumstance. I recently read a report of a 80+ year old man on oxygen who came for baptism to a church, and he was baptized. It was tough, but he did it. I have had to decline one baptism due to deep health concerns—and that person had already been baptized! Does anyone in our church remember the baptism of Jean B. who is now with the Lord? I recall hearing about it years ago.)

It is this close association of baptism with initial faith that gets some people turned around in their theology. They are so closely associated and they should always be like conjoined twins. Therefore some people say, “Well, you have to believe and be baptized to be saved.” But the Bible’s insistence that unbelief is what condemns us, and that salvation is not of works, show that baptism cannot be a work required to obtain salvation. But it is a natural first expression of faith. For example, Romans 10:9 says, “if you confess with your mouth...” Baptism is a prime time to give voice to that confession.

The meaning of baptism is to immerse in water, to dip. In these notes I will not further defend this obvious fact and propagate the time-wasting exercise of wrangling about words. If others insist on a different definition of the word *baptism* then they can implement that belief in a different sort of church than ours. The fact that someone believes differently than we do does *not* necessitate us to change our beliefs in order to accommodate that person.

Besides a few examples of “bootstrap” or “startup” situations, baptisms are events where the Christian’s testimony is made clear amongst a group of fellow believers—a church. These witnesses observe the glory of God in the life of the converted, and rejoice with the baptism candidate. If the profession of faith is not able to be made clear, then the person is not a candidate for baptism. How can I say this so confidently? We know from the example and evident pattern of the book of Acts, as well as the early church’s conduct. Obviously there are one-off events like the Ethiopian official. But such situations do not comprise a high percentage of baptisms throughout world history. And even in that case, there was another believer present (Philip) and other observers watching the testimony of baptism in the official’s life.

Concerning the order of baptism and its relationship to the very beginnings of a person’s salvation, this ordinance must be preceded by a saving faith in Christ. Acts 2:41 says, “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them.”³ Acts 8:12 adds, “But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.” That covers the order of events.

Now, about the symbolism of baptism. What is this ritual, and why is it so meaningful? It shows in pictorial form our association with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (going down into the water and coming up again). It also shows the connection of the Christian with the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By the way, it is very peculiar to have one name and 3 persons. This matches the very unique divine being that we are associated with as Christians—the Triune God. Now, in what I have just written, I used the words *association* and *connection*. What I really intend to convey is a more common theological term: identification. In baptism, we are *identified with Jesus and His church*. We are identified with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is a further

³ Note this verse is in the context of the controversial verse 2:38 which says to “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ...” Some suppose that baptism then is required *in order to obtain salvation*. Such is not the case. True belief brings one into the family of God, and then baptism comes after that.

symbolism of baptism, and that is of cleansing. Of course, water on the external of the body does not wash away sins. But it pictures a cleansing which happens for us when the Spirit of God applies the work of Christ and we are washed from sins. When saved, we are washed with pure water—born of water—and regenerated by the Spirit of God. Baptism does a wonderful job of picturing our cleansing.

The vestments of baptism in more liturgical churches also are indicative of the purity that a new believer experiences after being washed from their sins. They wear the white vestment *before* they are baptized, not just after! We do not place that much emphasis on the clothing of baptism (besides that it is modest) because the Scripture does not mention it.

Finally, I need to note for myself—and you too—what is the relationship between making disciples and baptize and teaching them? The latter two words are participles of *means*. Let me explain: disciples are not complete at conversion. New Christians are disciples, for sure, but disciples are not fast food. They are “made” by longer-acting means than just “getting them to believe.” Baptism and teaching are absolute requirements. There is no such thing as disciples made without baptism and without teaching in their local church. If you are not baptizing and teaching, then you are not really making disciples. Those activities are *essential* to the process.

Matthew 28:19-20—Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;**

D. **Teach** them to observe all things that Jesus commanded the disciples. The fourth “step” or part of the Great Commission given by the all-sovereign Jesus Christ is that present disciples train other disciples.

The verb “to teach” has a range of meanings that includes telling someone what to do, instructing them. That instruction can be provided in a formal or informal setting (BDAG, s.v. διδάσκω). I

would add that it should include not only telling people *what* to do, but *how* to do it, and what resources they have to accomplish it, etc. It also must include teaching of information that is not “doing” information but “knowing” information. You do not “do” anything about justification or receiving the presence of God’s Spirit or being Spirit-baptized into the church, except for trusting in the Lord. We do not teach a person to “do” something in order to get their sins forgiven, nor to have the power of sin broken. But it is crucial that every Christian be instructed to “know” that sin’s domineering power over them has been deposed, so that they can truly consider themselves (“reckon”) to be dead to sin and alive to God. A lack of knowledge in this regard is severely detrimental to one’s Christian walk.

Because of the pervasiveness of classroom-style education throughout the world, it is natural to immediately equate “teach” with classroom-style teaching. And a good bit of the meaning of “teach” can be implemented in this kind of context. In it, we have a teacher who has generally trained in the area of Bible interpretation and teaching, and who also has specifically studied on the portion or topic that he is teaching to prepare a “lesson” on that. What we call “normal means” are used to do this general and specific preparation. It takes effort.

But teaching in the way the Lord implemented it—and meant it here—is not only classroom-type instruction. He never had a classroom *per se*. He did speak to large groups in his discourses. For example, the Sermon on the Mount, or when He taught and then fed thousands of people at once (Mark 6:34, 8:2). We could say those are like a classroom, where He conveyed truth by speaking.

A lot of the gospels focus on another form of teaching—an apprenticeship, job-shadowing, vocational education, on the job training type of instruction. This is “practical instruction” like you would get in a vocational training program such as for nursing or electrician or mechanic or the “practical” experiences built into the educational system for many fields. For the disciples, it was even more than that—it was living together, traveling together, ministering together, serving God together. In this way, the disciples could see and absorb what the Lord Jesus was doing and

make it a part of their own lives. They could then live that same way and have others who followed them as they followed Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). To me, this is a much harder way to teach, but it is nevertheless necessary. I say harder because it is, for some of us, easier to *do* than show someone else how to do. It is easier to speak and let the audience apply themselves.

One idea that comes to mind is that if we do not regularly gather, both as a corporate body and in homes for hospitality or just doing things together, then we cannot accomplish this sort of discipleship teaching. If Jansen and I spent zero time together speaking about interpretive issues, administration, planning, visiting together, praying together, etc. we would not be accomplishing the

I believe we should think about this more like “training” than “teaching.” Go, make disciples, baptize them, and train them to keep everything that I have commanded you.

There is a corporate aspect to teaching, but there is also an individual aspect to it, a one-on-one kind of training that for some reason in many cases seems to have more impact on the life of the “student.” Have you stopped to think about that? When I am preaching to a group of assembled Christians, it provides a venue where I can speak generally on any topic, including hard ones, and not get into your personal space too much. But then *you* have to take the teaching and apply it. And that may not happen. In fact, many times the teaching goes right over the person’s head and they do not recognize how it applies in even obvious situations in their lives. On the other hand, if I sit down with you in your home or in my office because you *want* to be there and desire instruction, or need it, we might make much more progress even faster. But That is more confrontational, and sometimes people do not like that approach.

Jesus next specifies the content of the teaching. His disciples are to train other disciples to “observe” whatever He has commanded to them. To “observe” means “to persist in obedience” and refers to fulfilling the instructions of the Lord, giving careful heed to them. Major English translations have mostly used the translation

“observe” but that does not, at least to this reader, convey the meaning that the Lord has. To be “observant” as in “to be an observant Christian is probably the sense. The Legacy Standard Bible has “teaching them to keep.” The NIV wins this one though—it says, “teaching them to obey.” That is the clearest and reflects what I understand to be the Lord’s intended meaning of the original.

The “obeying” is to be carried out with respect to “all things” that the Lord taught and commanded them. The text is something like this: have them keep “all whatever I commanded you.” It is comprehensive in scope and it is thorough in depth.

If we were to try to summarize what we read in the gospels in this way, we would have some work in front of us. The remainder of the New Testament actually does so, but I think it would be neat to spend some time creating a summation of the Lord’s teaching while He was on earth just to see if we could grasp it better.

We also need to expand on this in terms of practical examples.

→3/22/2023 III. Assurance of the Great Commission

Matthew 28:20—I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

A. Do you remember this: Matthew 1:23 explained the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. In that eighth century B.C. text, God promised that a Son would be born and His name would be *Immanuel* which means “God with us.” We understand that to refer to the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity from the virgin conception and birth all the way to His ascension to Heaven.

Now, the gospel of Matthew closes with Jesus promising to be with the disciples always, all the way to the end of the age. God was with us in human flesh in Jesus during the 33 years of the first century. Afterward, the promise is that Jesus will still be with His people, meaning that *Immanuel* continues after the ascension, albeit in a different way! That promise not only echoes down to the present day, but also the fulfillment of it. This is not just a series of words, but a truth that is real.

B. Exactly *how* Jesus is with us is something we need to think about for a minute. The Lord is with us in this way: He sent His Spirit to dwell in us and be with us. Since the Spirit of God is God just as well as the Son and the Father are God, it is therefore true that God is still with us.

John 14:16-18—“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—¹⁷the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.”

C. Jesus is also with His people in terms of His omnipresence. Though imperceptible, He is there, just as God the Father and God the Spirit are also. “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?” Psalm 139:7 reminds us that we *cannot* get away from God. Wherever we are, He already is, and Has been there long before we ever got there.

D. Jesus is with the church in its hardest moments—when it must remove a member or make a declaration of about someone’s sin being retained/bound—and in the joys when it can declare someone’s sins forgiven because of the work of Christ. He is there when the church is asking for something in these respects, or in other things as well.

Matthew 18:20—“For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

E. Furthermore, Jesus observes everything going on and experiences the difficulties of His church. Do you remember reading that Paul was persecuting Christ (Acts 9:3-4)?

Acts 9:3-4—As he [Saul] journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. ⁴Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Jesus is very close to His church, in fact *within* it, and feeling the pokes of persecution as the church experiences them. When

governments try to close churches, or harass them, or Christians are harassed in the workplace, Jesus knows all about it. He not only sees the oppression of His people (Exodus 3:7) but He experiences it Himself.

F. Jesus protects His ministers. When Paul was serving the Lord in Corinth, Jesus promised:

Acts 18:9-10—Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; ¹⁰For I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.”

Thus Paul need not fear but could freely continue to speak. No matter what the Jewish religious authorities said, no matter what the idol worshippers said, or what government officers said, Paul had freedom to preach the gospel, to make disciples, to baptize, and to train them in accordance with the Great Commission. God had people appointed in that place for eternal life, and He was ensuring that they would be saved. His presence this way ensures the forward progress of His work.

- G. The Lord also stood with Paul and helped Him as he faced a court proceeding that could end his life (2 Tim. 4:17). Jesus chose in the end not to protect Paul from this outcome, but He traveled with Paul through the proceeding.
- H. The Lord has been with His people for millennia. Consider Joseph: Genesis 39:2-3, 21, 23. Or Moses: Exodus 3:12. Or Joshua: Joshua 1:5. Psalm 46:7 says that the Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. Isaiah 8:10, 41:10 give similar truths. Hebrews 13:5 reminds us that God will never leave His people.
- I. John 12:26, 14:3 and 17:24 teach that Christians will be with Christ in a more direct way in the future. 1 Thess. 4:17 reiterates it.
- J. If you are a Christian, whether you can “feel” it or not, God is with you. We are called to simply trust that promise. We can also relate to incidents in church history where it seems impossible to avoid the conclusion that Jesus was *with* His people.

K. I elected to title this section the “Assurance of the Great Commission.” The assignment is seemingly unending because there are always new areas to evangelize, always new people being born, new challenges to overcome, and training any disciple to obey all that Jesus has taught is itself an endless job. But the foundation of the Great Commission is rock solid and the presence of the Lord of the Commission assures ultimate success in the big picture. It does not mean every battle will be won, of course, or that His people will not suffer persecution, for they have and will continue to do so.

When you have a hard task, it is an awful lot easier when someone is going with you who knows the ropes. We are joining Someone who knows the way, Who has guided millions of missionaries and pastors and Christians over the centuries. He does not just give orders and then leave us entirely to our own devices.⁴

As with Joseph (Gen. 39:2, 21, 23), Moses (Exodus 3:12, 4:12), and Joshua (1:5, 9), and Gideon (Judges 6:16), and Jeremiah (1:8), so it is for us. God was *with* those saints and assured that they had the power to fulfill the tasks He assigned them. Those were their commissions. The Great Commission is our commission. Without the presence of God in Christ and the Spirit, we will not accomplish the task. But with that presence, we cannot help but accomplish it. We must not be overwhelmed by the Great Commission into a state of shocked inactivity. We have the presence of Christ going with and before us. This is the assurance that comes with the great assignment.

IV. Resources of the Great Commission

These points are drawn mainly from Acts 1. But the other Great Commission texts mention or allude to resources God provides.

A. The Lord’s presence. We focused on this in our last message as a point of *assurance* for our carrying out of the Great Commission.

⁴ We recognize that the Lord has indeed left for Heaven and is not physically present as He was during his lifetime on earth. Luke 19:11-27 reminds us that, like the nobleman going to a far country planning a later return, Jesus has left this earth and will return to establish His kingdom.

But the Lord's presence is also a *resource* for this mission. In the work we are doing, Jesus is not absent. Said the other way, as we take the gospel of Christ to the world, and to our neighbors, and to our co-workers, and to fellow parents sitting next to us at the baseball or soccer game or recital, Jesus is PRESENT with us. If you trust the Lord that HE is with you, you will be empowered to share the news of Jesus. With Him comes His all-encompassing authority and His clear terms of the assignment.

- B. The history of the resurrection. The facts are a powerful "tool" in making disciples. As they say, facts are stubborn things. The eye-witnessed facts of Jesus's cruel death and then resurrection from the grave together form a powerful resource in bringing someone to understand that the Bible is truthful about what it says, not only in terms of the historical events, but also therefore in the meaning and spiritual significance of those events.

Acts 1:3 says that Jesus presented Himself alive to His disciples for forty days, and they observed many unmistakable evidences that He was alive. If a man predicts he will rise from the dead and then does so...that means *something*. It is not just a curiosity to be left on your mental shelf for potential later examination—particularly when that man speaks about stakes that are very high, like gaining or losing your soul. He has *been* in the afterlife, so He knows!

- C. The Holy Spirit's presence and power. At His ascension, the Lord Jesus told the disciples to stay in Jerusalem for a time while they awaited the Promise of the Father, namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. With that divine intervention in their lives, they would receive special enabling for the task that Jesus had assigned them. This is explained in Acts 1:4-5. It was realized in Acts 2:1-21, and quite spectacularly so, to kick off the new era of the church. It does not happen in that externally visible way today. The presence and baptizing ministry of the Spirit is quiet, personal, internal; but it has major outward results in life and outlook.

In the most extreme cases such as persecution, Jesus promised that the Spirit of God would help the disciples to know what to say when they are confronted with legal proceedings (Matt. 10:19, Luke 12:11).

The Spirit of God also works inside of each believer to transform them from one degree of glorious Christ-likeness to the next (2 Cor. 3:18). This work, while not the same as Spirit baptism, invariably follows it. This includes not only behavioral transformation but also character, attitude, and thought transformation so that you think and speak differently than you did before becoming a Christian. This allows you to testify for Jesus to others.

In Acts 1:8, the focus is on the receipt of power when the Spirit of God comes upon them. As a result, they were certainly going to be witnesses to the resurrected Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. It is being a testifier of Christian truth—not being a miracle worker—that authenticates someone as having the power of God’s Spirit in their life. This power was manifest in Peter’s life, for example, in his preaching in Acts 2, 3-4, 5, 8, and 10-11, and in miracles sprinkled throughout the early chapters of Acts. It was evidenced in the missionary tours of the apostle Paul and teammates from Acts 13 through 28.

- D. The Lord’s instruction, recorded for us in what we call the New Testament. It is essential to fulfill the Commission. That body of literature is the content of our all of our teaching. John 14:26 indicates that the Lord promised to send the Spirit of God to help the apostles remember what they had been taught, so that they could pass that on to the next generations. This they did, in written form, in the 27 New Testament documents.
- E. The spiritual gifts God has given to the church. We have explained numerous times before that these gifts do not include the miraculous or revelatory gifts. They are the more “mundane” but no less important gifts: teaching, administration, giving, faith, service, evangelism, shepherding, exhortation, giving, leadership, showing mercy, and variations on these.
- F. Every member of the body of Christ is a resource in carrying out the Commission. God has not only given gifts to people, but He has given people to the church to prepare and train it so that the whole body can work together to grow and be built up (Eph. 4:7-12). You read of the Lord’s disciples going out two by two (Luke

10:1), which reminds us not just that there is strength in numbers, but that we have each other as a resource in making disciples. We might have a hard time speaking to a certain person, but our friend over here may not have such difficulty at all because of how they think or the experiences that they have had. You read of the church gathering and bearing one another's burdens and rejoicing together, and when someone comes into the church he may be convicted and worship God because of everyone's variously gifted part in worship (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

- G. There are some things that are *not* resources for doing the Great Commission. Of course, anything that hinders the progress of the gospel fits into this category.

The disciples asked in Acts 1:6 about the kingdom of God and the time of its restoration. He told them that this was not their concern. We infer from this that the kingdom is not active now and thus not a tool to attract or compel someone into faith.

A second thing that is not a tool for the Great Commission is supernatural acts that only Jesus and the apostles did. They are not available to us, nor do we need them, because the gospel itself is the power of God to salvation. The message of Christ carries the power of forgiveness because it is founded on the person and work of Christ.

A third non-resource for carrying out the Great Commission is social/political action. Christians should be and naturally are benevolent folks. But benevolence does not the gospel make. Politics does not save anyone, and you see nothing of politics in the gospels or epistles.

Conclusion

It is hard to summarize all that we have gone over regarding our Lord's final command to the church. But we can say with certainty that we have an assignment, and we must keep at it. We cannot give up or become distracted by another gospel, or other teaching, or other assignments. We have to pass on just what we have received according to the Word, and do so faithfully until we pass on.

We have authority and assurance and resources for this work that is unmatched in any other job you can think of. Not even the President of the United States has such resources to carry out his job. These things do not make the work easy, but they make possible what otherwise would be impossible.

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