

The Great Commission

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Introduction

The Great Commission is one of the most referred to and preached upon portions of Scripture by Evangelical and Fundamentalist pastors and teachers today. Given the fact that the Great Commission contains Christ's marching orders for the church, this emphasis is warranted. What is unfortunate regarding this Evangelical emphasis is the fact that this portion of Scripture is almost always misinterpreted in a manner that severely limits the meaning and scope of the passage. Christ's command to disciple whole nations (which is a comprehensive task that aims at developing a worldwide Christian civilization and culture) has been completely ignored and replaced with a command to witness to individuals and wait for the rapture. The aim of this brief study will be to examine the Great Commission in order to expose some common erroneous usages of it and to determine its real meaning and significance for the church and the world.

Christ's Authority

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen (Mt. 28:16-20).

When Jesus Christ gave orders to the eleven remaining apostles on a mountain in Galilee regarding the *spiritual* conquest of the whole earth, the first thing that He did was to declare the foundation for this mission. The imperatives of the Great Commission are based on the fact that Jesus Christ has received all authority. Christ's reception of "all authority" is emphasized in the original language. The verb is in the emphatic position: "Given to Me was all authority."

When believers read that Jesus received all authority they often ask: "If Jesus Christ is God how could he receive all authority? Didn't He already have infinite power?" When discussing the humiliation and exaltation of Christ, one must keep in mind that we are discussing the *divine-human Mediator*. Christ's humiliation consists of laying aside the divine majesty; assuming a human nature (body and soul); coming in the form of a servant; and subjecting Himself to the demands and curse of the law (Gal. 4:4). Berkhof writes, "On the basis of the passage in Philippians [2:7, 8] it may be said that the essential and central element in the state of

humiliation is found in the fact that He who was the Lord of all the earth, the supreme Lawgiver, placed Himself under the Law, in order to discharge its federal (covenant) and penal obligations in behalf of His people. By doing this He became legally responsible for our sins and liable to the curse of the law.”¹ After Jesus Christ the Mediator and federal head of His people merited eternal life (by perfectly obeying the law and by taking on Himself the full penalty for the guilt of sin at the cross) He received exaltation. His exaltation is the reward for His perfect obedience. It is “the judicial result of the state of humiliation.”² Because of Adam’s fall, Jesus (in order to save the elect) needed to assume a human nature, pay the penalty, and earn the reward as a real man, the second Adam. Judicially He was the covenant head of all the elect. Thus, Christ is referred to in Scripture as: “the first fruits of them who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20); “the first among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29); “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18). As the Mediator, Jesus secured a judicial re-creation. Christ’s resurrection and exaltation is a judicial declaration by the Father of a perfectly achieved salvation by the Son. Therefore, although as God Jesus already had all power and authority (metaphysically), as the divine-human Mediator He received all power and authority to complete His judicial mission of taking the elect unto glory. As the pre-incarnate Son He created the earth and as the mediator He created the church (Col. 1:15-22). “In the Great Commission the claim of Christ to have received from God ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’ formalizes *judicially* what was already true metaphysically: God’s rulership over all.”³

There are five things that one should know regarding Christ’s authority:

(1) **Jesus Christ was given all authority by God the Father.** “Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: ‘Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was’” (Jn. 17:1-5). Before the creation of the world the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit entered into a voluntary agreement regarding the salvation of the elect. God the Father sent the Son into the world to save those He had chosen. The Son came into the world to do the Father’s will; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life and died a sacrificial death on behalf of the chosen. The Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the son to apply redemption to God’s people. “[I]n the economy of redemption there is in a sense, a division of labor: the Father is the originator, the Son the executor, and the Holy Spirit the applier.”⁴ After Jesus had successfully fulfilled His mission He was exalted by the Father. Peter said: “This Jesus God has raised up...let all the house of Israel know assuredly that

¹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939), p.332.

² Ibid, p. 345.

³ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 42.

⁴ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 266.

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:32, 36). “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:8-9).

(2) **Jesus received His authority as a reward for His redemptive obedience.** Jesus came to do the Father’s will. “Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business?” (Lu. 2:49). “Behold I have come...to do Your will, O God” (Heb. 10:7). Jesus said to His disciples: “My food is to do the will of the Him who sent Me, and to finish His work” (Jn. 4:34). Thus at the close of His earthly ministry Jesus said, “I have finished the work which You gave Me to do” (Jn. 17:4). Immediately before Jesus died on the cross He cried out, “It is finished” (Jn 19:10).

Jesus earned His glorification by perfectly fulfilling His redemptive mission. This mission was two-fold. As the second Adam He had to fulfill the covenant of works by living His whole life in perfect obedience to God’s law. He also had to suffer and die as a blood sacrifice for His people (the elect). Jesus came to “fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15). He was the sinless, spotless “lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29). Jesus came “to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan 9:24). “He having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12).

The sinless life of the Son of God and the shedding of His precious blood is why Jesus was glorified. His redemptive work made the Great Commission possible and a reality. Christ’s total authority and the Great Commission which flows from that authority is founded upon Christ’s victory at the cross. “There was every reason then why He should be ‘glorified’.... Having endured the Cross, He was fully entitled to enter ‘the joy set before Him.’ Having poured out His soul unto death, it was meet that the Father should ‘divide him a portion with the great’ (Isa. 53:12).”⁵

(3) **Jesus received His authority when He rose from the dead.** The verb “was given” in the original language indicates that at a single point of time in the past Christ received all authority. Since the Great Commission was spoken to the apostles before the ascension, the logical point of time in which all authority was bestowed was during or immediately after the resurrection. Paul said that Jesus was “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:4). The resurrection of Christ is the turning point of His ministry and of all human history. When Jesus was dead in the tomb He was still in a state of humiliation but the moment He rose He entered into His exaltation and reward.

The prophet Daniel had a vision in which he saw the ascension of Christ and His enthronement by the Father. “I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man was coming, and He came up with the Ancient of days, and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the

⁵ A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975 [1945]), part 3, p. 104.

peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14 NASB). Although this passage points to the ascension rather than the resurrection as the time when Jesus received all authority, there is actually no conflict between Matthew 28:18 and Daniel 7:13-14. The Bible views the resurrection, ascension and enthronement as different aspects of Christ’s exaltation. Jesus received all authority at the resurrection but the coronation ceremony did not take place until the ascension. The ascension and enthronement were guaranteed the moment Christ walked out of the tomb.

(4) **The authority that Jesus received is comprehensive in nature and scope.** The Greek word (*exousia*) translated *authority* “denotes active power; the full ability to do as one wills.”⁶ This means that Christ’s desire will be accomplished and that His commands must be carried out. The scope of Christ’s authority is indicated by the phrase “in heaven and on earth.” Jesus has been given universal cosmic dominion not only over the physical universe and everything in it but also over everything spiritual: the spirits of those who have died and all the heavenly hosts (angels and demons). “Jesus Christ...has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him” (1 Pet. 3:21-22). He is the “head of every man” (1 Cor. 11:3) and the “head of all principality and power” (Col. 2:10).

Before the resurrection Jesus as the divine-human mediator did not have all authority. Yes, it is true that before the resurrection when Jesus walked the earth the wind and sea obeyed His every word, demons submitted to His commands, He healed every manner of disease and He even raised the dead. But, it was only after Jesus finished His redemptive work and rose from the dead victorious that He had the right and foundation to enter the heavenly sanctuary and boldly make intercession for His people. Christ’s victory over death secured victory for the elect. Jesus emerged from the tomb with the keys of death and hell. “I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (Rev. 1:17-18). Jesus by His death crushed the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). He bound the strong man and is actively plundering his goods (Mt. 12:28-29). The author of Hebrews taught that through Christ’s death “He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

When Jesus instructed His disciples regarding His coming crucifixion, He said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to Myself” (Jn. 12:31-32). In Revelation 20 Satan is bound so that he will no longer deceive the nations (Rev. 20:2-3). (This binding occurred at Christ’s first coming at the resurrection and *not*, as many suppose, at the second coming.) Christ’s death and victorious resurrection enabled Him to spiritually conquer all nations. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). As God, Jesus had the power to create worlds; but to conquer a world in darkness and iniquity, to ransom a people guilty of breaking God’s law, Jesus had to pay the supreme price. He had to die an

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961 [1943]), p. 1171

atoning death. Once this was accomplished Jesus rose from the dead with the judicial authority to recapture the whole earth. The elect of every nation will be saved. Only after the resurrection did Jesus Christ receive dominion over the whole earth which Adam had forfeited by his sin.

(5) **Jesus Christ's authority is the basis or foundation of the commands He gives to the apostles in verses 19 and 20.** Before the resurrection Jesus told the disciples: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:5-6). After the resurrection the apostles are ordered to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28:19). The word *therefore* indicates that those who go and make disciples of all nations, do so on the basis of the mediatorial authority given to the Messiah. Those who go are to promote obedience to that authority. Because Jesus obeyed the Father and achieved salvation for the whole world (i.e., people of every tongue, tribe and nation). He received all authority from the Father. Because Christ has been given comprehensive, universal authority, the apostles are commanded to go and make disciples of all the nations. Jesus after having won the war is given all authority. He then delegates that authority to the church. The church is to command all nations to kiss the Son, to submit to the King of kings and Lord of lords. "For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet" (1 Cor 15:25).

The fact that the Church's marching orders for world conquest are based upon Christ having all authority in heaven and on earth should give the Church great encouragement and optimism. Is there anyone or anything that has more power or authority than Jesus Christ? Christians should march off to battle knowing that Christ has secured the victory, and that His omnipotence cannot be thwarted. The pessimism and defeatism taught in so many churches today is totally unscriptural. Although there are periods in history when Christians suffered persecutions and setbacks, rest assured that the white horse Rider will conquer all His opposition. The "therefore" indicates "that what otherwise would be absolutely impossible now becomes gloriously possible, yea, an assured reality."⁷

Avoiding a Common Interpretive Error

Before considering how believers are to disciple the nations the grammatical structure of the passage should be noted to avoid a common misunderstanding. I have heard a number of sermons on the Great Commission in which the preacher points out that the word translated as "go" is a participle and thus should be translated as "going" or "having gone". Thus, this point of the sermon becomes: "As you are going *make disciples*. When you are at work, or shopping or on vacation *make disciples*." Although Christians certainly ought to win people to Christ whenever the opportunity arises, the participle *poieuthentes* should be translated as an imperative. The Great Commission has three participles: go, baptize and teach. (Keep in mind that participles are not true verbs but are verbal adjectives.) These three participles are dependent upon the main verb "make disciples" which is an imperative or command. Therefore, the three

⁷ Ibid, p. 1172.

participles (go, baptize and teach) are translated as imperatives because they receive their imperative sense from the main verb. The way to make disciples is to go, baptize and teach. That is precisely what the apostles and evangelists did in that first generation of the church. In only one generation churches were established throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace.... Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their word to the ends of the world” (Rom 10:15, 18; cf. Ac. 17:6; Rom. 1:8; Col. 1:5, 6, 23). “Christ expected His New Covenant people to go, that is, to be militant in their promotion of the true faith.”⁸

What Is a Disciple?

Since Jesus instructed the apostles to make disciples, one needs to define the word *disciple*. In ancient Greek society the term disciple was used to describe a pupil or apprentice of a wise man. Disciples were seekers of knowledge and wisdom. In the Greek philosophical schools a disciple was a person who submitted himself to a gifted teacher. This discipling process involved a close relationship with and dependence upon the philosopher. The New Testament defines a disciple as a person who believes in Jesus Christ and then spends the rest of his or her life following the means of grace. Disciples must study God’s word and submit themselves to all the teachings of Christ. Because Jesus has delegated authority to ordained teaching servants, part of being a disciple involves joining a church and submitting to the elders of that church. “Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Heb. 13:17). Of course believers are only to submit to elders when they teach what Christ has commanded. When the elders of a particular church teach things contrary to Christ’s law-word (e.g., liberalism, pop-psychology, feminism, antinomianism, Arminianism, Dispensationalism, etc.) one must leave that church in order to be a faithful disciple. A disciple of Jesus Christ submits every area of life to the King. No area of life is excluded from His authority. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas. 1:22).

Why All Nations?

Jesus could have instructed the apostles to disciple all individuals or all men, but instead He instructed them to disciple all *nations*. This fact is significant. The word for nation in the original language (*ethnos*) means a multitude of individuals of the same nature, genus, race or nation. It indicates a large group of people who often speak the same language and have the same culture. The ancient, biblical and modern uses of the word nation are basically the same: multitudes of people that are distinct from other groups in various ways such as language, customs, heritage, culture, geographical location, etc. Paul said, “And He has made from one

⁸ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission*, p. 47.

blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Ac. 17:26). John wrote: “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands” (Rev. 7:9).

The significance of Christ’s choice of the word nations, rather than individuals or men is that the goal of the Great Commission is not just that a few individuals here and there are to be disciples but rather that eventually whole nations are to be brought under the subjection of Jesus Christ. The Church’s task is not completed until institutions, cultures and civil governments submit to the King of kings. This task is to be accomplished by spiritual and not physical means. Individuals and families are to be evangelized and brought into the church to learn all that Christ has commanded. All believers in turn are to apply the word of God to every area of life. As salt penetrates and preserves meat, God’s word will change every aspect of society. The eventual result will be a Christian society. The idea that the Bible is a book to be used only for private, family and church devotional use; that the earth, cultures and civil governments are somehow outside the realm of Christ’s comprehensive authority is a reduction of Christianity. It is totally unscriptural.

In order to properly understand the comprehensive nature of the Great Commission one needs to consider the relationship of the Great Commission to the “cultural” or “dominion mandate” given to Adam. When God created Adam and Eve in the garden He commanded them to have dominion over the whole earth (cf. Gen. 1:26-30). God’s intended purpose for man before the fall was to develop a world-wide godly culture, a culture that honored and glorified God. All of man’s activities and pursuits were to be done God’s way and for God. All the accumulated labors of mankind over time: music, art, science, medicine, architecture, economics, infrastructures and so on would be done obediently and would reflect man’s love of God and mankind. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works and his descendants had fulfilled the dominion mandate the result would have been a world-wide, obedient, God-loving civilization. This was God’s original preceptive will for mankind. But man’s sin, the eating of the forbidden fruit, necessitated the need for a Savior. God in His kindness and mercy instituted the covenant of grace. God’s original plan for a godly civilization was not set aside.⁹ However, because of sin this plan could only be accomplished through Jesus Christ, the second Adam. Christ’s resurrection is the new beginning, the foundation of the regeneration of the world. The total victory that Jesus accomplished on the cross is to be progressively brought to bear on all nations. “His ‘all authority’ over ‘all the nations’ demands we preach His crown rights over all men and all their institutions, cultures, societies, and nations. The saving of multitudes of individuals must eventually lead to cultural Christianization under Christ’s rule and to His glory by His providence, in conformity with God’s creational purpose. This world order was designed to have

⁹Many Evangelicals reject the idea that the dominion mandate is still in force. But, there are passages which clearly indicate that the pre-fall cultural mandate has never been set aside. The mandate is restated by God *after* the fall (e.g., Gen. 9:2; Ps. 8:6-8; Heb. 2:6-8).

man set over it, to the glory of God. This is why at the very beginning of human history unfallen man was a cultural creature.”¹⁰

Go!

After Jesus told the apostles that He had received all authority, He then ordered them to go and make disciples of all nations. However, before they were to go, first they had to wait for the glorified, ascended Christ to bestow power on the church by pouring out the Holy Spirit upon it. “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you” (Jn. 16:7). “But you 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” (Ac. 1:8). At Pentecost the church (which is God’s lampstand—Zech. 4:2-6; Rev. 1:12, 13, 20) received an effusion of oil (the Holy Spirit) and as a result tongues of fire appeared on the disciples’ heads. The key to the success of the Great Commission is the power of the Holy Spirit. “Not by might nor by [physical] power, but by My Spirit says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The conversion of Jewish proselytes from several different nations on the three different continents on the day of Pentecost was a sign of the eventual victory of the gospel over all nations.

A question that needs to be considered in order to understand the command to go is: Who does this command apply to? Does it apply to all Christians indiscriminately? Did it apply only to the eleven apostles? Does it apply to all ordained ministers of the gospel? The twentieth century answer to the question above (generally speaking) is that the command to go applies to all believers without exception. The Great Commission is usually interpreted as a command for all believers to go witness to their neighbors. This interpretation is based on a number of arguments. One argument is that the apostles were on the mount as representatives for the Church as a whole. Thus, the command applies to every Christian in every age. Another argument is that Christ gave these commands not just to the apostles but to the 500 brethren mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6. Those who believe that 500 were present base their argument on the phrase “and some doubted” and the idea that the mount was the best place for the 500 to gather. Such argumentation is little better than an educated guess. There is no way to know whether or not the 500 were present. The account says: “then the eleven disciples went away...to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them” (Matt 28:16). The best argument is based on Acts 8:1 ff. “At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.... Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word” (Ac. 8:1, 4). Walker writes, “But we cannot fail to notice that, *while authority is emphasized and revered, it is not regarded as the one thing needful*. After the death of Stephen, the Christians of Jerusalem are ‘all scattered abroad except the apostles’ and laymen as they are, ‘preach the

¹⁰ Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission*, p. 58.

word' wherever they go, with no other license and commission than that which is born of love to Christ and zeal in His service (8:1-4)."¹¹ The soundness of this argument will be discussed as we consider the classical Reformed interpretation of the Great Commission.

The interpretation of the Great Commission which was held by virtually all Reformed and Presbyterian commentators from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries (which today is rejected, forgotten and ignored) is that the command to go was given specifically to the apostles and continues throughout time only through an ordained ministry. David Dickson [1647] writes, "Christ has instituted a ministry of teachers and rulers of his Church to continue from his resurrection to the end of the world; for he says, *Go ye, make disciples*, teach them obedience to me; *I will be with you to the end of the world*.... The community of ministers and rulers of the Church respective have all the nations of the earth under their charge to gather disciples to Christ out of them.... The community of believers, or the body of covenanted and baptized disciples, are not the subject of this authority granted for gathering of churches, administration of doctrine, sacraments, discipline and other public ordinances: but the community of the ministers, teachers and rulers, contra—distinguished from the body of disciples which is taught and governed; for it is said, *Go ye, my ministers, make ye disciples, baptize ye and teach ye them*.... The ministers of the gospel, teaching and ruling elders respective, are the true successors of the apostles in the dispensation of the doctrine, sacraments and discipline appointed by Christ, for they are appointed in the same patent [authoritative doctrine] with the apostles, and spoken to in the person by Christ, saying, *I will be with you to the end of the world*."¹² Matthew Henry writes, "The commission he gives to those whom he sent forth; *Go ye therefore*. This commission is given, (1.) To the *apostles* primarily, the chief ministers of state in Christ's Kingdom, the architects that laid the foundation of the church. Now those that had followed Christ in the regeneration, were *set on thrones* (Luke xxii. 30).... (2.) It is given to their successors, the ministers of the gospel, whose business it is to transmit the gospel from age to age, to the end of the world in time, as it was theirs to transmit it from nation to nation, to the end of the world in place, and no less necessary. The Old Testament promise of a gospel ministry is made to a succession (Isa. lix. 21); and this must be so understood, otherwise how could Christ be with them always to the *consummation of the world*? Christ, at his ascension, gave not only apostles and prophets, but *pastors and teachers*, Eph. iv. II."¹³

Although the Bible teaches that all Christians have a duty to be salt and light to the surrounding culture (Mt. 5:13-16) and that Christians should witness to their neighbors (e.g., Jn. 4:28, 29, 39; Ac. 18:26) the interpretation which states that the Great Commission is given to the apostles and ordained preachers and teachers until the end of the age is to be preferred for a number of reasons.

First, the Bible teaches that the apostolic office was unique and foundational in that first generation of church growth. Matthew, Mark, and Acts all teach that the Great Commission is

¹¹ Thomas Walker, *Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1984 [1910]), p. 20.

¹² David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ According to Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981 [1647]), pp. 414-415.

¹³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 5:446.

given to the eleven apostles. “Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them” (Mt. 28:16). “Afterward He appeared to the eleven... And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature’” (Mk. 16:14-15). “The former account I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up, after He through the Holy Spirit had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen” (Ac. 1:1-2; cf. 1:8). The apostles had a special role to play in the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel’” (Ac. 9:15). “Paul is Jesus’ personal representative to the Gentile world.”¹⁴ “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1). “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor. 9:16-17).

Second, the Bible teaches that those who preach the gospel must be sent. “How then shall they call on Him in who they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things” (Rom. 10:14-15). Murray writes, “In the last clause of verse 14 the apostle is thinking of the institution which is the ordinary and most effectual means of propagating the gospel, namely, the official preaching of the Word by those appointed to this task. Verse 15 reflects on the necessity of God’s commission to those who undertake this office.”¹⁵ Believers do not need a special commission to witness to their neighbors. But, preachers or ministers do need a special commission to go out and preach the gospel. The apostles were sent out by Christ Himself. Evangelists and elders are sent out by the Church. “Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen...and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia...” (Ac. 13:1-4). The Holy Spirit chose two ordained teaching elders to become missionaries and then the church laid hands on them and sent them out. Obviously not every Christian is ordained and sent out to preach the gospel.

Third, every example of gospel preaching in the book of Acts is by ordained men. The book of Acts is God’s record of what it means to go. It is predominately a book of action. History (the indicative) explains Christ’s order to go (the imperative). There is the example of the preaching and miracle working of the apostles Peter and Paul. As apostles these men were called, trained, set apart and sent out directly by Christ (cf., Ac. 9:5-6, 15; 1 Cor. 9:1, 17-18; 15:8-9; Gal. 1:12, 15-18). All the examples given in Acts of gospel preaching from people who

¹⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), p. 341.

¹⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968 [59, 65]), Part 2, pp. 58-59.

were *not* apostles involved ordained men who were evangelists. The first example is that of Stephen (Ac. 6:8-7:53) who was ordained as a deacon (Ac. 6:6). Stephen was a great miracle worker. He “did great wonders and signs among the people” (Ac. 6:8). This fact sets Stephen apart from most other believers. The gift of teaching and miracle working was restricted by God to only some believers (cf., 1 Co. 12:29). The next example one encounters is Philip (Ac. 8) who was first ordained as a deacon and then became an evangelist. Lenski writes, “We must combine Philip’s preaching with his power to work miracles. These gifts of God made him what has been called an evangelist, a missionary preacher. He was thus more than the ordinary Christians who spread the gospel only as a part of their general Christian calling; yet he and his work remained under the authority of the apostles and of the mother congregation in Jerusalem (v. 14) so that he acted with their approval and as their agent.”¹⁶

There also is the example of Silas (also called Silvanus) who accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (cf., Ac. 15:40 ff.). Silas is identified as an elder (Ac. 15:22); an apostle or missionary (1 Th. 2:6) and a prophet (Ac. 15:32). He was actively engaged in an official teaching and preaching ministry (cf., Ac. 15:32; 1 Th. 2:2; 2 Cor. 1:19). Another “fellow worker” (Rom. 16:21) with Paul was Timothy. Timothy was a teacher (2 Tim. 2:2, 15), preacher (2 Tim. 4:2) and minister of the church (1 Tim. 4:6). He was an ordained teacher who was committed with a special trust (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). Another example is Barnabas. Barnabas was a prophet and teacher (Ac. 13:1) who was commissioned by the church for missionary work and sent out (Ac. 13:2-4). Therefore, he is referred to as an apostle or missionary (Ac. 14:14). Barnabas’ cousin John Mark (cf., Col. 4:10) was also an evangelist. He served with Paul on his first missionary journey, with Barnabas in Cyprus and also wrote the gospel of Mark.

If one examines the evangelists mentioned in the New Testament it appears that they were chosen from among men who were already ordained either as deacons or elders. Although there was an overlapping of function in the teaching offices (e.g., Paul refers to Timothy as an evangelist and an overseer [2 Tim. 4:5]; Peter the apostle refers to himself as a “fellow elder” [1 Pet. 5:1], etc.) Paul lists evangelist as a distinct office in Ephesians 4:11-12, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” An evangelist is someone who primarily was sent out to preach the gospel in new areas; who would then (in conjunction with the apostles and other established churches) work to organize new congregations in those specific areas. Once the new congregations had the oversight of a pastor and elders (cf., Tit. 1:5) the evangelist would move on to other new territories. The evangelist was an ordained servant because his task involved far more than witnessing. It concerned teaching the whole counsel of God or all that Christ had commanded. They were involved in “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry” (Eph. 4:12).

Fourth, fulfilling the great commission involves the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s supper). The Bible teaches that only lawfully ordained ministers of the

¹⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961 [1934]), p. 315.

word are to administer the sacraments. Ministers are shepherds appointed to feed the flock of God (Jer. 3:15; Eph. 4:11; Ac. 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Part of this feeding involves the administration of the Lord's supper which is a means of grace. This truth is supported by Ephesians 4:11-13 which names the offices given for the teaching and perfecting of the saints. "Is not the administration of the sacraments a perfecting of the saints, of the work of the ministry, of the edifying of the body of Christ?"¹⁷ Only *some* are appointed to such a task. Furthermore only ministers of the word are referred to as "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1), "and there is nothing which more properly belongeth to the ecclesiastical stewards than the dispensation of the sacraments."¹⁸ Gillespie writes, "We have clear and convincing examples in the New Testament, that the sacraments were administered by public ministers, called and appointed thereunto, as baptism by John (John i. 33, 'He hath sent me to baptize'), and frequently by the apostles, in the story of Acts. The Lord's supper, administered by Christ himself (whose example in these things imitable we are bidden [to] follow, who also himself commanded *touto poiete; this do*); and by the Apostle Paul, Acts xx. 7, 11. So 'the breaking of bread' is joined with 'the apostles' doctrine and fellowship,' Acts ii. 4.... So that a lawful minister may in faith administer, and the receivers receive from him in faith, the sacraments, having Scripture warrants for so doing; but there is neither any commission from Christ to such as are no church officers to administer the sacraments; nor can there any clear example be found in the New Testament, of administering either the one sacrament or the other by any person who can be proved not to have been a minister lawfully ordained. Therefore such persons cannot in faith administer, nor others in faith receive from them, either baptism or the Lord's supper."¹⁹

All the evidence enumerated above that the Great Commission refers primarily to ordained servants is usually rejected on the basis of Acts 8:1, 4: "At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.... Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." This section of Scripture does not contradict the interpretation that says the Great Commission was given to lawfully called and ordained preachers. After Luke makes the general statement that "those who scattered went everywhere preaching the word" he then by the example of Philip the evangelist tells us how the word was spread. The "those who were scattered" in verse 4 obviously does not mean every believer without exception (e.g., children, the sick, the elderly, etc.). Some argue that the word translated preach (*evaggelizomenoi*) in verse 4 does not refer to public proclamation but to personal evangelism. Alexander writes, "As he there said that all (except the twelve) were scattered, he now says that all who were thus scattered preached the word. Some would infer from this that none but preachers were expelled; but it is far more natural to understand the verse as referring, not preaching in the technical or formal sense, but to that joyful and spontaneous diffusion of the truth, which is permitted and required of all believers, whether lay or clerical, ordained or

¹⁷ George Gillespie, A Treatise of Miscellany Question in *Works* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 [1846, 1640]), 2:37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:38.

unordained.”²⁰ Even if this interpretation were true it would not contradict the classical Protestant view of the Great Commission. Everyone acknowledges that believers have an obligation to witness to their neighbors. When discussing the preaching of Philip the evangelist, Luke uses the word *kerrusso* which signifies a heralding or a *public proclamation* of the gospel. While all Christians should explain the good news of who Christ is and what He has accomplished to their friends and acquaintances, only ordained gospel preachers are to publicly preach the word and administer the sacraments. The reason there is so much misunderstanding today regarding who is to go is that many people confuse the task of evangelism with the much more comprehensive task of discipling the nations. Discipling the nations involves church planting, the sacraments, an established preaching ministry, church discipline and so on. While all believers should evangelize, only some are called upon to go to foreign lands to establish churches.

Baptize

In order to disciple the nations one must go. The second thing necessary is to baptize. Why is baptism placed before teaching? Because under normal circumstances the majority of teaching occurs after baptism. This point is true not only of covenant children but also of adult converts. The knowledge needed by an adult to be saved is small. But once a person is converted to Christ the whole Bible is to be learned and applied to life. The order of baptism followed by teaching is emphasized in the book of Acts: “Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine [or teaching] and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and prayers” (Ac. 2:41-42).

There are many reasons why baptism is important for discipleship.

First, baptism signifies a person’s regeneration by the Holy Spirit. It is by this sovereign act of God that hearts are subdued. The heart of stone is replaced by a heart of flesh. The unwilling are made willing and the unable are fully enabled. Christ’s conquest of the earth begins in the hearts of men. Not one person would believe in Christ and become a disciple without the new birth.

Second, baptism signifies a believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection. All the saving graces flow from Christ’s atoning death.

Third, baptism signifies a Christian’s cleansing from sin.

Fourth, in baptism the new believer publicly acknowledges his submission to Christ’s ownership and authority. The sincere believer who comes to be baptized has repented. He has laid down the weapons of his warfare and has submitted to the rule of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He “is proclaiming that he has broken with the world and has been brought into union with the Triune God, to whom he intends to devote his life.”²¹ Many converts to Christ who

²⁰ J. A. Alexander *Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1980 [1857]), p 319.

²¹ William Hendriksen *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), p. 1001.

come from pagan cultures have testified that they were disowned by family and friends only after submitting to Christian baptism.

Fifth, baptism under normal circumstances is required for membership in the visible church. Becoming a member of a church that teaches the true Reformed religion (i.e., biblical Christianity) is absolutely essential to one's spiritual growth. Discipleship is not to be divorced from the church government, officers, laws and censures that Christ has instituted for His body. The anti-institution church spirit of this age is a reflection of the world's hatred of Christ's authority. Personal devotions and self-government are important factors for sanctification. But, they are only part of the Christian life. God is also zealous for public worship, the sacraments, church discipline and Christian fellowship. "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Heb. 13:17).

Sixth, baptism is in (or into) the name of the Triune Jehovah (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Baptism signifies that union with Christ brings believers into a vital relationship with the three persons of the Godhead. When a person believes and is justified he is *adopted* into God's family. God is Father (*Abba*). Believers are co-heirs with Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in believers and enables them to more and more put off sinful behavior and to put on righteousness. The church is Christ's body, His own bride. Dickson writes, "There are three Persons in the Godhead distinct from another in order of subsistence and operation, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.... These three are one GOD, undivided in essence and operation, equal and one in authority and power; their name and their exercise of authority is one; for it is said, *Baptizing them, not in the names but in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*"²²

The fact that discipleship begins with baptism, teaches us that the church is God's primary institution for discipleship and spiritual growth. Christ gave the power of public teaching, baptizing, administering the Lord's supper, governing and disciplining unto lawfully called and ordained church officers. If people are to be baptized, preached unto, taught and disciplined they must become a member of a local church. Para-church ministries do *not* have the authority to publicly preach, baptize, administer the Lord's supper or administer church discipline. Do para-church organizations do many good things for people in society? Yes, they often do. However, they are *not* founded upon Scripture but upon pragmatism. Historically para-church groups have weakened the church. Often short term gains are followed by long term problems (e.g., false ecumenicity, heresies, innovations in worship, a lack of respect for the church and church officers, evangelistic gimmicks, pop-psychology, etc.). If the church is not being faithful to her calling then the solution is repentance and revival; not the setting up of parallel rival institutions. The responsibility to disciple the nations rests with the church and no one else.

²² David Dickson, *Matthew*, pp. 415-416.

Teach

The third thing necessary to disciple the nations is to teach them to observe all things that Christ has commanded. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is described as riding on a white horse going forth to conquer the earth (19:11-14). How does Christ subdue the nations? Does He employ physical means such as bullets, bombs and missiles? No. “Out of His mouth goes a sharp two-edged sword, that with it He should strike the nations” (19:15). Jesus subdues the nations through the power of His Spirit and through the preaching and teaching of His Word. The sharp sword is the word of God—the Bible (cf., Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16). We disciple the nations “by teaching them the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures, and seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to make our teaching effective in those we try to instruct in divine things.”²³ Everything that can be known (this side of heaven) regarding God, Christ, the law, salvation, the church, our estate and so on is revealed in the Bible. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

A study of the book of Acts reveals that the apostles took Jesus’ command to teach seriously; for they were totally devoted to spreading Christ’s doctrine. “And they [the new converts] continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship...” (Ac. 2:42). “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine [or teaching], and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” (Ac. 5:28). “And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Ac. 5:42). Paul passed this same type of dedication to his companion Timothy when he wrote: “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2).

It is very important that the church teach everything that Christ has commanded. The “all” of Jesus’ teaching includes not just everything that He taught in His public ministry but also the whole word of God—the Bible. Jesus taught the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament. He taught a historical, literal view of the first chapters of Genesis (e.g., Mt. 19:4-6). Christ accepted the worldwide flood account that occurred in Noah’s day (cf., Mt. 24:37-39). He also taught the abiding validity of the Old Testament moral law (Mt. 5:17-20). Our Lord told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come and guide them into all the truth thereby guaranteeing the divine inspiration of the New Testament (Jn. 16:13).

When the church fails to teach all that Christ has commanded the result is disaster for the church and society. The mainline Protestant denominations abandoned the word of God during the 1920’s and 1930’s. The effect was apostate wicked denominations and a culture in decline. The void left by the demise of most of Protestantism has been filled by atheism, secular humanism, the occult, new age mysticism, rank hedonism and so on. With the abandonment of

²³ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1987), p. 416.

the Bible has come an increasing abandonment of the rule of law. Statism has followed in the wake of modernistic theology.

Fundamentalist and Evangelical churches which have adopted Dispensationalist doctrines have also failed to teach everything that Christ has commanded. They teach that most of the Old Testament is irrelevant to the Christian; that God has not provided blue prints for the Christian reconstruction of society. By failing to teach “the whole counsel of God” Fundamentalists unwittingly handed over our culture, institutions, courts (and so forth) to the secular humanistic modernists and atheists. By teaching a reductionist version of the Great Commission Evangelicals have increasingly shifted toward Christian existentialism. The goal is not the Christianization of whole nations but the building of experiential ghettos. “Get saved and come to church each week and have a wonderful experience.” The modern Evangelical church does not lead in the area of science and culture but rather follows. Churches are often patterned after Hollywood with crass entertainment, jokes and pop-psychology. The salvation of individuals is emphasized but the false gospel of Arminianism is preached (i.e., man has veto power and sovereignty over God). Once a person makes “a decision” for Christ he is told not to waste his time changing society but to wait for the imminent rapture. The modern Evangelical church is impotent. It has lost its saltiness.

Jesus did not teach or endorse a retreatist, pietistic form of Christianity. Christ taught a dynamic, militant, nation-changing, culture transforming doctrine. The church is to go into every nation and preach the gospel. Churches are to be established with church governors and a “whole counsel of God” preaching ministry. As more and more people in society are saved, baptized and taught who then apply the word of God to their personal lives, family lives, business activities, civil government, education, economics and so on, society will become transformed. The church is to keep going, baptizing and teaching until every earthly institution and every nation has submitted to Jesus Christ. A nation is not totally disciplined until it explicitly acknowledges the kingship and authority of Christ. The goal of the Great Commission is that each nation would explicitly acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in their constitutions, legislature and courts; and that each nation would covenant with Christ.

The Great Commission not only condemns churches which fail to preach the “whole counsel of God” or “all that Christ has commanded”, but also implicitly rebukes all believers who add to what Christ has commanded. Churches that instruct their members to celebrate extra-biblical holy days (e.g., Christmas, Easter); or, instruct members to follow a church calendar; or tell believers to sing uninspired hymns in public worship are teaching things not commanded by Christ. Likewise, denominations which forbid the consumption of alcoholic beverages in moderation or forbid the eating of meat on certain days are adding man-made regulations to the law of Christ. The apostle Paul has warned us to avoid such legalistic nonsense. He says that man-made regulations do not contribute to our sanctification. “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These

things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but, are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:20-23). The Great Commission restricts the church’s task to teaching all that Christ has commanded—no more and no less. Thus, we are free from the doctrines and commandments of men.

Christ’s Encouragement

After Jesus commanded the apostles to disciple the nations He then gave them encouragement with this promise: “Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). The word *lo* when used in the New Testament is usually an imitation of the Hebrew style of address that has the meaning of “behold” or “see.” Jesus’ statement could be paraphrased as: “pay attention to this, I even I am with you.” Lenski writes, “The exclamation ‘lo’ is to rivet our fullest attention on the great promise with which Jesus closes. [*Ego*] is decidedly emphatic, ‘I myself.’”²⁴ Christ’s promise of His continual presence is given emphasis and therefore should not be treated as a mere afterthought on the part of our Savior.

When Israel was about to engage on their God-given mission of conquest over the pagan nations within the promised land, Joshua spoke of God’s special presence: “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh.1:9). Israel went forth to conquer the seven heathen nations with the sword. The apostles, their associates and their successors throughout history go forth to conquer by the word and Spirit. Both are dependent upon God’s special presence for courage, success and ultimate victory. Paul said: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor. 3:8).

Jesus told the apostles that His leaving the earth (at the ascension) was to their advantage. “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment (Jn. 16:7-8). Immediately before His ascension Christ said to His disciples: ”But you 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). Christ’s spiritual presence (the baptism of the Holy Spirit) was more important to the task of the Great Commission than even His bodily presence. After Christ ascended and was seated at the right hand of Power, He poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. This baptism empowered and emboldened the apostles and evangelists in the task of discipling the nations. The same men who fled and cowered in fear at the arrest and prosecution of Jesus are seen after Pentecost preaching with amazing boldness, courage and fervency, even under extremely dangerous circumstances. Should we not also go forth with courage and boldness? We should always keep in mind that the resurrected, all-powerful Lord of glory is our ever present companion and ally. Jesus who has “eyes like a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14) is walking in the midst of the lampstands (Rev. 2:1): “so the Lord patrols the

²⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg 1961 [1943]), p. 1180.

ground, is ever on the spot when He is needed; His [spiritual] presence is not localized, but co-extensive with the Church.”²⁵ Gentry writes, “Believers are adequately empowered for the task of world evangelism and the Christian culture transforming labor that follows evangelism’s trail. The Christian has the abiding presence of the resurrected Lord of glory through the spiritual operation of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Whom Christ says grants ‘power from on high’ (Luke 24:49). The Christian should not read the newspapers and fear the encroachments of the various branches of secular humanism in history, for secular humanism in all of its manifestations is but an idol for destruction.”²⁶

Jesus said, “I am with you always” or literally in Greek, “I am with you *all the days*.” Jesus is leaving not a single day without certainty of His help. Christ is not just with His people every moment of every day but also to the end of “the age”. The Lord of glory will be with the church to the end of the world. Jesus remains with the church until the task that He has commanded is completed. This proves that the Great Commission applies to the church until the second coming of Christ. Our Lord’s promise is not only the ultimate encouragement, but is also our guarantee of victory. Christians should never be pessimistic regarding the success of the gospel in the world.

If anyone had a reason to be pessimistic, would it have not been the first disciples? They were persecuted, stoned, tortured, imprisoned, slain by the sword, beheaded, fed to the lions, crucified, roasted alive, beaten with rods and hated by all men. A number of fathers and mothers had to watch as their children were slain knowing their demise would follow. Yet, the early church remained active, bold, and militant by preaching Christ crucified, and establishing churches throughout the empire. They did not build tennis and basketball courts, retreat, and then wait for the rapture. Rather, they conquered the Roman Empire with the sword of the Spirit. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:66). “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Christians are not to look to the *New York Times* or CNN for hope and encouragement but to Christ alone. Believers who preach pessimistic defeatism for the church simply are showing a lack of faith in Christ’s emphatic promise. They are really no different than the spies who told Moses: “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.... The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature” (Nu. 13:31-32). Are we able to spiritually conquer the whole world? No, not in and of ourselves (Lu. 5:4-11; Jn. 15:5). But, Christ who is all powerful; who has all authority in heaven and earth is able. Jesus is at the head of His army. The church rides on white horses behind the King (Rev. 19:14).

Appendix

²⁵ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982 [1915]), p. 436.

²⁶ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission*, p. 96.

Is the Office of Evangelist a Temporary Office which Ceased with the Passing of the Apostles?

Modern Reformed interpreters and theologians acknowledge the fact that the apostolic office and prophetic gifts have ceased because they were foundational to the early church (Eph. 2:20) and were no longer needed once the New Testament canon was completed (cf., 1 Cor. 13:8-12; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). But, what about the office of evangelist? There is no question that this was a distinct office in the first century. Should modern Reformed churches have a distinct evangelistic office?

There are two basic views regarding how this question should be answered among Reformed thinkers. One view which was almost universally held by Reformed authors (in the first few centuries after the Reformation) was that the evangelistic office was unique and intimately tied up with apostolate and therefore ceased when the apostolate ceased. The reasoning behind such a view is as follows.

(1) The early evangelists had Spirit-given supernatural powers to work signs and miracles (e.g., Stephen, Ac. 6:8; Philip, Ac. 8:13; and Barnabas, Ac. 14:13). The working of signs and miracles was rare. The miraculous gifts were needed to authenticate the messenger at the time of a new revelatory activity (cf., Ex. 4:5; 1 Kgs. 17:4; Jn. 10:25; 2 Cor. 12:12); and were needed during the foundation laying period of the church. This miracle working points in the direction of a unique, temporary, foundational office similar to the apostolate.

(2) All the evangelists named in the New Testament (except Stephen and Philip) have ministries that are intimately connected with the work of the apostles (e.g., Barnabas, Timothy, John Mark, Titus, Silas, and Luke). They often functioned as special assistants to the apostles. "If anyone inquires about Titus, he is my partner and fellow-worker concerning you. Or if our brethren are inquired about, they are messengers of the churches, the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 8:23). Since the work of the apostles has ceased then the special work of an evangelist is no longer needed.

(3) The evangelists often engaged in special work. They are observed doing things that only one specially commissioned by an apostle could do. The apostles sent out evangelists as superintendents of the churches: "But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged when I know your state" (Phil. 2:19). Paul ordered Titus to "appoint elders in every city" (Tit. 1:5; cf., Ac. 15:22, 25; 2 Tim. 4:9; Tit. 3:12). Given these considerations the evangelistic office as defined by New Testament historical example has ceased. The elements of being an evangelist which are not unique to the first century such as preaching the gospel in new areas, establishing churches and pastoring churches obviously continue; but, they do so by ordinary preachers who have been called to missionary work. It appears that by the end of Paul's ministry Timothy had settled into a normal pastorate. Yet, Paul still commands Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5).

Those who believe that the office of evangelist continues, argue that an evangelist should be defined simply as one who preaches the gospel where it previously had not been known. They

downplay the evidence regarding the unique first century role of an evangelist by emphasizing the etymology of the word for evangelist (*evaggelistes*) and the word which means to preach glad tidings (*evaggelisthai*). They also point out that the evangelist Philip does not appear to have any close working relationship to any apostle. Hodge also argues “That Timothy and Titus were in some sense apostolic vicars, i.e., men clothed with special powers for a special purpose, and for a limited time, may be admitted, but this does not determine the nature of the office of an evangelist. They exercised these powers not as evangelists, but as delegates or commissioners.”²⁷

Regarding the arguments that the office of evangelist continues, one should note the following. An office should be defined not just by its name and one activity but by all the scriptural historical information surrounding it. That the working of signs and wonders was a part of the office cannot be denied. Furthermore, there are so many examples of evangelists doing special work with and for an apostle that these duties mostly were a normal part of that office. Presbyteries do have the authority to send out delegates or commissioners (Ac. 15:22). However, it is probably not a mere coincidence that in Acts and in the Epistles, the evangelists are always the ones given these special duties. Regarding Philip, it is important to note that evangelists did not always accompany or work for an apostle (e.g., the evangelists Barnabas and John Mark worked together in the mission field of Cyprus). However, given all the information we have regarding the evangelistic office the New Testament evangelist has more in common with the apostolate (e.g., direct revelation, signs and wonders, messenger between churches, appointing elders, rapid movement between new cities, etc.) than with our modern missionaries.

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²⁷ Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964 [1856]), p. 161.