

JESUS' TEACHING ABOUT MISSIONS IN THE FOUR-FOLD GREAT COMMISSION

What constitutes a missionary call? Some would say that the needs of the world compel a response from the church. Wars, natural disasters, oppressive governments, and lack of education are just some of the many reasons that people are subjected to sub-human conditions, and because of this misery, "Christians must go and help." At the beginning of the first Gulf War, the Kurdish people fled their homes, and in desperation sought refuge in the cold, harsh, mountainous region of their country. "We have no friends but the mountains," was the cry for help that was heard around the world. Many responded to this plea and rightly so, because followers of Jesus who have no compassion for the hurting are forced to examine the validity of their relationship with the One who gave his all (1 John 3:17). Therefore, a call founded or grounded by the magnitude of human need is a valid calling, and even biblical calling, but it is not the highest calling.

Many, over the centuries, no doubt, have responded to the call to go and proclaim the gospel because of the reality of an eternal hell that awaits those without Christ. Jesus, in Luke 16:19-31, opens hell's door for just a moment so that the church can be awakened from its slumber by the deafening cries of the rich man. William Booth captured the emotion of these verses when he penned these words, "Go stand by the gates of hell, and hear the damned entreat you to go to their father's house and bid their brothers, and sisters, and servants, and masters not to come there."¹ A missionary call that is motivated by the reality of eternal damnation of those without Christ is not only biblical; it is right and moral. A calling based upon the physical and spiritual needs of the person is highly emotional and effective in touching the emotions of the

¹"100 World Christian Quotes," Accessed 29 April 2003. Available from

listener, however, there is yet a higher calling which beckons to the will of man: the command to go as stated in the four-fold Great Commission of Jesus Christ.

There is no doubt what Jesus' intentions are concerning the world or the people of the world. All four of the Gospel writers understood the message explicitly, in that this mandate became the culmination of each of their books to the church. In fact, when properly understood, the Great Commission is, "The logical summation and natural outflow of the character of God as he is revealed in the scriptures, of the missionary purpose and thrust of God as unfolded in the Old Testament and historically incarnated in the calling of Israel, of the life, theology, and saving work of Christ as disclosed in the Gospels, of the nature and work of the Holy Spirit as predicted by our Lord and manifested on and after Pentecost, and the nature and design of the church of Jesus Christ as made known in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles."² The Great Commission then is the pivotal word to the church by which all plans must revolve and all wills must submit.

Without this four-fold Great Commission, the church would still have its missionary nature, however, because of these last and reiterated words of the Master, the church is without excuse. There need not be a "special call" to go. In fact, with such emphasis and re-emphasis of the church's task, there must be a "special call" not to go to the nations who are in need of the gospel.

The Great Commission is given by all four Gospel writers (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-22) and in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:8). It is noted by George Peters, "Too often a narrow view of our commission is presented because we lift out the emphasis of only one of the Gospel writers. The fact that the Holy Spirit has seen fit to

preserve for us the various versions is important, and the composite nature must be emphasized if a proper balance is to be maintained."³ He continues, "On the other hand it is important to study and note the individual traditions as preserved in the several Gospels."⁴ Therefore, each Gospel writer's commission will be explored individually and in the conclusion a comprehensive statement will be given which defines the call of every Christian.

Matthew's Great Commission

Matthew's account of Christ's commission, which is the main emphasis of the church today, took place on "the mountain where Jesus had told them to go" (Matt 28:16). The name of the mountain is not known. Some suggest Mount Tabor, but there is no proof.⁵ Others claim it is the mountain where he taught the beatitudes (Matt 5:1). What is known is that over five hundred brothers came together to meet with the Lord that day (1 Cor 15:6).

Matthew's commission can be outlined as follows:

1. The power of the king- "all authority"
2. The purpose of the king- "make disciples"
3. The precepts of the king- "going... baptizing... teaching"
4. The presence of the king- "I am with you"

Matthew emphasized first the authority of Jesus. Jesus declared that he had been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt 28:18). Jesus had come to "destroy the works of the devil" (Heb 2:14), and as the second Adam, to take back the authority which had been given over

²George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 173.

³Ibid., 179.

⁴Ibid., 179.

⁵John Gill, "John Gill's Exposition of the Bible." Accessed 22 April 2003. Available from <http://www.bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/GillsExpositionoftheBible>; Internet.

to Satan by the fall of man (Gen 3). Through his death, Jesus totally "disarmed the powers and authorities" (Col 2:15), and through his resurrection had been declared with power to be the Son of God (Rom 1:4); thus, his power, sovereignty, finality, and absoluteness are declared.

Jesus begins his commission with the reminder of his authority because world evangelism depends on and must have its origin in God. He is the one who "holds the keys of David" (Rev 3:7). Closed doors are opened and opened doors are closed by the Sovereign One. With the word "therefore," Matthew then connects this initial declaration of authority with the purpose of the commission. This "therefore" transfers the theoretical into the practical. He was saying, "Because I have this authority and you belong to me, you too have this power to do what I am about to tell you to do."

According to Matthew, Jesus' purpose for the church is to make disciples. This purpose has been veiled at times because of the English rendering of Matthew's commission. However, when closely examined in the original Greek, the Holy Spirit's intent is clearly seen. There are four key verb forms given in Matthew 28:19-20: "go," "disciple," "baptizing," and "teaching."⁶ Of these four words, the verb "disciple" is central and is the only one, which is an imperative. It expresses the core of the commission.⁷ The other three verbs are invaluable in that they are the ways or methods needed to accomplish this task of "making disciples." Mark Terry states that three accompanying verbs can be translated, "going," "baptizing," and "teaching" and in the context seem to answer to question "how?"⁸ Terry continues, "In fact, it is most likely that these represent a process or a simple *three step method*, in which disciples are

⁶Peters, *A Biblical Theology*, 182.

⁷Ibid., 182.

⁸John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson, eds., *Missionary: An Introduction to the Foundation, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 72.

produced: first by going to those who have no opportunity; second, by calling them to a relationship with Jesus in which they repent, believe, and are baptized as a symbol of their allegiance to Christ and his kingdom community (the church); and third, by teaching them to hold fast to all that Christ commanded."⁹

Not only does Matthew give clearly the purpose of the church, that is, "to make disciples," but he also gives the scope of this purpose. The task is unfinished until disciples have been made of all nations. For many years, mission strategies were based upon "nations" as a geographically entity, however, today, missiologists would take note of the Greek rendering of the word "nation" and translate this word as "people" or "people group." Consequently, the church has not fully obeyed the Great Commission until she has disciples going, baptizing, and teaching among all the language and tribes of the world.

Finally, the Holy Spirit reminds the church that she not only is commissioned with Christ' power, purpose, and precepts, but she goes out with the assurance of his presence. Some translations render this as, "to the ends of the Earth," while other translations state, "to the end of the ages. Both of these translations are incredible reminders that the missionary is never out of God's presence or his reach. How many missionaries in the midst of lonely and difficult assignments have leaned on this promise?

⁹Ibid., 72.

Mark's Great Commission

Mark's gospel is the shortest of the three synoptic Gospels and is fast paced, centered around preaching and probably had the Gentiles as its target audience. It has been suggested that the Gospel of Mark is a summary of Peter's sermon at the house of Cornelius (Acts 10). Others theorize that Mark's account of the life of Jesus was directed to some particular situation encountered in the course of the Gentile mission with Paul and Barnabas.¹⁰

This fast paced Gospel ends with a fast paced commission similar, yet unique from Matthews's account. Mark, in his commission, is the only one to raise the issue of reception and rejection of the gospel. Mark emphasized preaching, whereas, Matthew commanded discipleship. Mark focused on the good news while Matthew commanded obedience to all that Jesus taught. Mark's target audience was every creature; Matthew focused on the people groups of the world. These differences are not contradictory, but rather, they compliment each other and give added insight to the church. George Peters has outlined Mark's Great Commission as follow: the method of missions- preaching; the scope of missions- the world; the message of missions- the gospel.

Preaching or proclaiming God's message to the nations is first and foremost of importance and is a necessity. The Bible declares that people are lost and cannot believe, "in the one of whom they have not heard" (Rom 10:14). The apostle Paul then asked a question, "And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Rom 10:14)

The Bible is explicit by command and example that preaching is a necessity. Jesus went about preaching as did John the Baptist. The disciples were called to "be with him and then

¹⁰Roger E. Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 155.

go out and preach" (Mark 3:14). The book of Acts centered around the preaching of the good news. Peter stood on the day of Pentecost and preached (Acts 2:14). The apostles were commanded by the Chief Priest and Elders to preach no more in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17). Stephen preached as the stones were hurled at him (Acts 7). The persecuted believers were scattered and preached the gospel wherever they went (Acts 8:4). Phillip preached in Samaria (Acts 8:5), and to the seeking eunuch (Acts 8:34). Peter preached to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10), and Paul preached from Antioch to Rome.

There is no scriptural record of someone being saved without the gospel being preached. Preaching is God's method of missions. Should there be presence or lifestyle evangelism? Should there be ministries that meet human needs and seek to minister to body as well as soul? The answer to all of these questions is yes, however, these others ministries should never replace the priority of proclamation; they should only compliment what has been preached.

Some might argue that Saul was converted without a messenger proclaiming the gospel to him. Others have used Cornelius as an example of salvation through a dream or vision. However, an honest, exegetical study of both of these focal passages in Acts gives clear testimony to God's message being relayed through one of God's servants. In the case of Paul, Stephen had boldly preached the gospel while Saul, "was there giving approval of his death" (Acts 7:59). Also as Saul lay helpless in Damascus, God sent Anninas to tell him, "All that he had been assigned to do" (Acts 22:10). Cornelius had seen and talked with an angel but the angel did not preach to him. The angel instructed Cornelius to search for Peter and then to listen to "everything the Lord had commanded him to tell him" (Acts 10:34). As Peter, not the angel, preached the good news, the Holy Spirit fell on all who listened and they were saved (Acts 10:44).

Not only did Mark's Great Commission give the method of missions, it also gave the scope of missions: the world. He uses two expressions to emphasize the breadth of this command: "into all the world," and "to all creation." Peters states, "God is the God of all the world and the creator of the universe and of mankind and that he is the only and absolute God, and that his redemption is as wide as his creation reaches, as deep as the need requires, and as high as his glory demands."¹¹

Lastly, the message of missions according to Mark is the gospel or good news. The good news is that, "Christ died for our sins, was buried and was raised from the dead, according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-5). Two things must be central in the gospel message. First, the gospel is centered around Christ. There are many false christs today, therefore, in order for there to be a gospel, the Christ of the Bible must be preached. Second, no element of the gospel can be deleted and remain a true gospel. Some want a bloodless death, while others preach a continual sacrifice. Cults, skeptics, and atheists futilely attempt to discredit the resurrection. The gospel, "according to the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4) centers around the Christ of the Bible being a substitute sacrifice for the payment for all sins and being bodily resurrected as a declaration that he is Lord of all and "judge both of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42).

Luke's Great Commission

Luke's record of the Great Commission takes place at the beginning of the forty days of the Lord's post-resurrection appearances. Earlier that day, the Lord had walked and talked with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, and had finally revealed himself to them while they ate. These two hurried and found the eleven gathered together, and while they discussed the

¹¹Peters, *A Biblical Theology*, 190.

happenings from earlier that day, Jesus appeared in their midst. It should have been enough just to see him and be with him, but Jesus began immediately not only to settle their hearts, but to open their minds and direct their wills. Luke does not record how long Jesus taught that first night, but it can be surmised that his discourse lasted from one to several hours. There is no doubt that the resurrected Lord had their undivided attention! Luke's commission, like the other synoptics includes the scope of the mission: to all the nations. He also emphasizes Christ's death and resurrection as being central to their proclamation. However, the Holy Spirit, through Luke brings to the forefront some unique emphasis. The first of these emphases is that Luke based his commission explicitly upon Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures." (Luke 24:44-45). The message, the method, the power, the scope, and even his presence all points back to the Old Testament. By pointing the disciples back to the Old Testament as the foundation of their future, this not only grounded them biblically, but also enabled them to see that history is truly "his story" and that the will of God is to bring the nations to himself.

There has never been another plan. This plan has never been thwarted and never will be. In that one evening, as Jesus met with the disciples, everything changed, because now they understood. They understood the promise made to Eve (Gen 3:15). They understood the promise to Abraham (Gen 12:1-4), and his descendants. Joseph's time in Egypt now made sense. The meaning of the exodus from Egypt through the death of a lamb now was illuminated by the Spirit. They now understood the meaning of the many sacrifices and priests and rites and rituals. The disciples were like the tribal chieftain in the Philippines who declared, "Now I know that

everything points to Jesus."¹²

The second unique emphasis from Luke's account is his specification of what to preach in response to the gospel. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, repentance should be demanded and forgiveness should be offered. Evidently, the disciples understood this, for when asked by the crowd what must be done in order to be saved, Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven" (Acts 2:38). Peters says that, "Repentance and remission of sins is the subjective aspect of the gospel."¹³ "Christ has not only done something for us, but he is ready to do something in us."¹⁴ The cross and resurrection remain fundamental to the gospel message, and these according to Peters are objective, which makes the subjective possible.¹⁵

The third unique emphasis recorded by Luke is Christ's reminder that they were witnesses of these things. Luke repeats it again in Acts 1:8 where he says, "You will be my witnesses." Witnessing was something they would do, but it was more of who they were and what they had seen and heard and experienced.

Finally, Luke clarified in what way the small band of uneducated followers could accomplish what the Lord had told them to do. Matthew's commission spoke of all authority belonging to Jesus. Luke's commission taught how that authority and power could belong to the disciples. They had seen the Lord and even understood the scriptures and the plan for world evangelism, but Jesus told them to wait until the Holy Spirit came upon them. It is evident that

¹²Jesse L. Jennings, personal missions experience.

¹³Peters, *A Biblical Theology*, 192.

¹⁴Ibid., 192.

¹⁵Ibid., 192.

the dynamic of the gospel and the success of the mission depended upon the power and presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the disciples.

John's Great Commission

John's account is also a testimony of what happened on, "the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together" (John 20:19). H. Cornell Goerner says, "John's summary in these three verses is one of the shortest but perhaps one of the most profound form of a great commission."¹⁶ It is profound because Jesus compares the sending of the disciples to the Father's sending of the son. "The mission implies a spiritual identification of the disciples with their Lord in the work which is delegated to him by the Father."¹⁷

This work was not something new but a continuation of what had started in the heart of the Father. The disciples would go out in like mission, that is to "seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The disciples would also be sent out in "like manner."¹⁸ Jesus came not as a king, but a servant carrying the burdens of all those "who are weary and heavy laden" (Matt 11:28). He became poor so that others might become rich. The Father sent the son as one whom "did not quarrel or cry out and did not snuff out the smoldering wick" (Matt 12:19-20). Christ sends out each disciple to be the "everliving, ever-incarnate, ever-teaching, and ever-atonning Lord."¹⁹

In verse twenty-three of John chapter 20, John records as part of his commission an

¹⁶H. Cornell Goerner, *All Nations in God's Purpose: What the Bible Teaches About Missions*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1979), 87.

¹⁷Peters, *A Biblical Theology*, 193.

¹⁸Ibid., 195.

¹⁹Ibid., 195.

often mis-interpreted passage of scripture. Do the disciples have the authority to forgive sins?

Upon first glance, it would appear from this verse that this is so. However, when carefully studied and in keeping with the message of the Bible as a whole, it can be concluded that this statement by the Lord was meant to be a "mediatorial ministry."²⁰ Theirs was the privilege and responsibility to preach the gospel to every nation with the possibility of the unrepentant repenting and the unforgiven receiving forgiveness. The disciples then and now carry the keys to the kingdom of God. The key is the gospel of Jesus Christ meant for all, but available only to those to whom this key is given.

The Great Commission as recorded by the four Gospel writers presents a comprehensive and detailed pattern for the church to follow in its missionary assignment. This comprehensive plan is as follows:

1. The church's authority is Christ's authority.
2. The church's plan is to make disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching.
3. The church's method is preaching the death and resurrection of Christ with the offer of forgiveness of sins through repentance.
4. The church's scope is to go everywhere, preaching to everyone, until there are disciples among every people group in the world.
5. The church's power is the power of the Holy Spirit, which enables the church to be a witness.
6. The church's calling is based upon the scriptures and not just upon the needs of mankind.
7. The church's example is Christ who came as one sent to seek and save and serve.

²⁰Ibid., 197.

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