

Introduction to the Great Commission

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The Great Co-Mission

When we talk about biblical discipleship, it is necessary to begin with the "Great Commission." I like to call it the "Great Co-Mission," because it is not something that we are called to alone. It's not a commission to any individual but to the entire church of Jesus Christ. The church is, essentially, a family of Jesus' current disciples. We are the avenue through which Jesus reigns and works in this present world. Yes, God does work outside of and apart from the church. That is indisputable, but we are his primary work on the earth. We are the visible, tangible manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth. We are His servants, his instruments, and we are the receiving body for every person who comes to saving faith in Him and submits to His sovereign lordship over the entire universe, which includes their lives. That is to say, to become a Christian is to automatically become a member of the church, the body of Christ.

The Purpose of the Church

The church of Jesus Christ exists to educate, equip, and empower those pursuing a deeper knowledge of God and their relationship with Him. Notice the three E's; just education is not enough. Education is huge in Christianity, but it's not the whole deal. Basic Christian practice consists of education, equipping, and empowering ourselves and others to better serve the one true God with our lives. It goes without saying that these three elements are not all there is to Christianity, but they are three key elements to effective, biblical discipleship. We in the body of Christ are pursuing God. We desire to know Him better [educated], to be more completely filled with His Spirit [equipped], and to be yielded to Him so he can use us [empowered]. We long to be educated, equipped, and empowered.

The church's mission is given to it by Jesus Christ himself, and the Lord gave us the Great Commission with the intention that we would fulfill it. He alone is the boss, the head of the church. We as the church, all of us together, have this mission from the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Therefore, our vision should be to fulfill the mission he has given us, to live it, to love it, to be consumed by it. This is called focus and obedience. That's why we educate, equip, and empower ourselves and one another, to put the Word of God into us, to so deeply embed it in every aspect and fiber of who we are that it freely and constantly flows out of us to the fulfillment God's purposes. We are instructed to "be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). That's the purpose of our salvation, of our discipleship, to become doers of God's Word. Doing God's Word is how we accomplish doing his will, for God's will is his Word, and his Word is his will. Remember that Jesus taught us to pray that his will "be done on earth as it is in heaven." If his will is going to be accomplished on this

earth just as perfectly as it is in heaven, it is going to be accomplished through us, his people, for we are the agents of his will in this present time. At least, that is what we are called to be.

To accomplish this we have to be introspective. As Christians, we have to examine ourselves to make sure that we are truly in the true Faith (2 Corinthians 13:5-6; 2 Peter 1:10), which was "once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). As churches also, we have to examine ourselves, as members and as leaders, to make sure that we are not only true churches, that is that we are made up of truly born-again believers in Jesus, but that we are also real churches, that is engaging in true, biblical discipleship for the growth and maturity of the entire body and each member individually for maximum effectiveness as God's army of salvation. 1 Peter 4:7 says, "For the time has come for judgment to begin in the house of God." The Bible says that God has appointed a day in which he will judge the living and the dead through Christ Jesus (Acts 17:). So, the great and final judgment of God has already begun. It begins now with us as we examine and judge ourselves so that we will not be judged under His fearsome and mighty hand on the last day. "For if we judge ourselves, we will not be judged" (1 Corinthians 11:31).

The Responsibility of the Church: the Church's Job

The Great Commission is centered on the gospel, God's plan of salvation for humankind. It shows us how to share our faith and how to make disciples. It provides us a checklist so we can become doers of the word. Discipleship is what the church does. It's our job. As the church, it's what we do. What is the church? Is it the building? No, it is who we are. We're the church. We could be only two or three, but that is still the church. Our buildings could all disappear. We could meet cramped up in some tiny apartment or at a park somewhere. The place doesn't matter. We are the church! We have to keep this in mind as we are talking about the Church's mission. When we talk about the church, we are talking about us--Jesus's disciples, the people of God. We are, "living stones," and we are "being built up [as] a spiritual house, a holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:4-5). This is the biblical picture God paints of what his church truly is. It is not built with brick and mortar, or with lumber, concrete, or any other material, but with these living stones, that is, with you and me and every other disciple of Jesus Christ.

As the church, we need to be responsible for the mission God has given to us. We have to stop putting on services and start doing service. That is, we cannot live out a showy existence as the church by putting on a weekly or semi-weekly program for "attendees." We must be doers of the Word. That means living out the Word of God in every aspect of our ecclesiastical practice. We are commanded by Christ to love one another as He loved us, to live for one another, to give our lives for one another, to serve one another, and to bear one another's burdens. Discipleship is what we do. We cannot come to church on Sunday simply because we have to put on the service in order that people will come, hoping that they will be privately and individually blessed so that, hopefully, the Lord will bless us too (or more!) for facilitating their blessing. We are the church; we are already blessed! We have Jesus Christ. We are His house, His body, His temple, His family, and that is the greatest blessing we could ever hope for. So as the church we need to stop chasing blessings and start enjoying and sharing the blessing that we already have--Jesus Christ Himself.

This does involve leadership which is to guide us and to direct the process. God certainly uses people that have been around longer, who know how to implement true, biblical discipleship. But it also takes every member of the body of Christ to lay down their lives for one another and live to fulfill God's purposes for us both as individuals and, especially, as His church. We have to embrace our responsibility and step up, saying, "I want to do God's will. Let's do this together."

The job of our apostolic churches is to equip those who are chosen, who are here coming to church because they want God so that he can change their lives by his love and thereby become more and more like him, so they can be perfected, mature, grow up in all things in him. The job of our pastors and ministry leaders is to make sure that they can grow and be perfected for the work of ministry, and then to equip them for their own unique ministerial calling. This is all from Ephesians chapter four. Apologetics plays a large part in discipleship, especially when it comes to evangelism. Simply put, apologetics is defending the faith. Apologetics is not just about debating evolution or whether or not God exists, but it is about conquering false ideas, it is about "casting down speculations and everything that exalts itself against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:3-6). Apologetics is evangelism! Apologetics should always have the intention of saving souls. When you're giving people reasons the Bible is true, when you're giving people reasons that God exists or that the resurrection of Jesus is historically credible and believable, you're giving people reasons to believe in Jesus of Nazareth. You are presenting reasons to "believe that" so that the person can begin to "believe in" the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our heart, as the church, should be that they come to faith in Christ Jesus, so they will cross the line from being outside of God's household of faith, God's family, to being inside, adopted by the Creator and Sustainer of the universe as His special sons and daughters. Our overwhelming desire and motivation for unsaved, non-Christian people needs to be that they come to faith in Jesus, get baptized in His name, and that it doesn't stop there, but we need to see to it that they are discipled as well so that they can grow and become like Jesus, getting to know him more and more intimately and becoming a powerful instrument in His hand for continued ministry in the world before the final consummation of this present age.

Knowing the Mission

In Matthew 28:19, "Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." What does this mean? First off, it's worth pointing out that it does not say, "Go and make converts to a new religion," or merely "Go and make new converts to me by baptizing them." It says much more than that. Jesus says, "Go and make disciples." How do we do that? Well, Jesus gives a methodology of how to make disciples. He says first baptize them, second, teach them everything that I have commanded you. Teach them what? Everything! Well, that about covers it. This means everything that he commanded the disciples, everything we have in the New Testament, everything in the Gospels and Acts, in the epistles written to the church, also including teachings from the Old Testament. Everything.

The Four Accounts of the Great Commission

Many people recognize three accounts, sometimes only two, of the great commission. Some only Matthew 28:19. But the Great Commission is contained in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and it's repeated in Acts 1:7-8. So that five! In the Great Commission handout, I have these four accounts of the Great Commission in the gospels compared to John 3:5 and Acts 2:38 to illustrate the bigger picture of God's biblical plan of salvation. Take some time to look over that, and I hope it's helpful.

So, what exactly does Jesus mean by, "Go and make disciples"? What does He mean by "baptizing them?" What does He mean by "teaching them to observe all things I have commanded?" We have the Book of Acts as an example of how to fulfill the Great Commission. The Lord did not merely leave us with this command at the end of the gospels. He gave us an example, so that we could see how it was fulfilled by the early church. We have a guide. The first part of the great commission talks about being sent. The word "apostle" means someone who is sent. We are all sent by God. If we are in Christ, we have a mission, and like I said it's a mission together, not just separately. We all have a common mission. The whole church is sent by God to fulfill the Great Commission.

Matthew records Jesus saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations." Mark, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Sounds similar, right? Some people stop there, but no. Luke has also an account of the Great Commission, although it's a little bit more detailed. Luke is renowned for being a detailed historian. What Luke records is Jesus quoting what the gospel is. He says, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for Christ to suffer and rise from the dead the third day." Instead of saying "go preach the gospel," he's saying, "this is the gospel," and He quotes it. Finally, in John Jesus says, "As the Father has sent me, I now send you." Of course, this part of the Great Commission is fulfilled in the first part of Acts 2:38 which we often don't quote. "And Peter said to them." Peter was sent by the Lord himself to deliver the soul-saving information found in the rest of Acts 2:38.

After Peter had preached the gospel to them on the Day of Pentecost, his audience cried out, "Men and brothers, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). He brought them to that point. He got them to the point where they wanted to know how to respond to the good news about Jesus. He got them to realize their guilt and need forgiveness, their need for a Savior, for their

Messiah. And notice that Peter answers them, promptly and straightforwardly. He had the answer they seek. Jesus had given it to him in the Great Commission. It didn't come from Peter, but it came from God. It came from what Jesus said in the Gospels, and it also said from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus who had just come and indwelt him.

One to the second part of the Great Commission. Matthew says, "baptizing them in the name." The name is common in the Great Commissions accounts in the Synoptic (or similar) gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke. There is a mention of Jesus' name in all three, although only in Matthew and Luke is it linked with baptism. Here in Matthew, it says, "the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit." We know that this is the name of Jesus Christ, because Jesus Christ is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In Mark Jesus says, "he who believes and is baptized will be saved", and then later He mentions, "he who believes in my name."

Remember that Jesus quoted the content of the gospel in Luke. He said, "The Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead the third day." He was speaking of himself, but he was saying "the Christ," speaking of himself in the third person. Here in Luke, he sticks with the third person and says that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations." There is the name again. That repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name. Notice the "to all nations" which is similar to Matthew 28:19, and since we know Acts 2:38, as well as the overall teaching of Scripture and the biblical purpose of baptism, we know that baptism in the name of Jesus is for the remissions of sins. So we have the parallel here with Acts 2:38. Luke 24:47 says that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached" in Jesus' name "to all nations beginning at Jerusalem." This is the message that is to be preached to all nations—remission of sins in Jesus' name.

Now we know that Jesus didn't just say, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teach them all that I have commanded you, and I am with you always to the end of the age." Jesus didn't just talk for only two or three seconds and that was it. He was teaching His disciples, and each one wrote down different aspects, Jesus' basic teaching in different words, the words that each of them recalled as the Holy Spirit brought everything Jesus said back to their remembrance. It's like a sermon your pastor preaches on Sunday or a lesson your professor teaches in class. Every listener receives it in a somewhat different way, but the message conveyed is the same message.

John's presentation of the Great Commission is a bit more poetic. Jesus begins by saying, "As the Father has sent me, I now send you." Then he says, "If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven." What does this mean? Jesus is telling his disciples to go and forgive sins. If we know that baptism is for the remission of sins, we know what this is talking about. There is confusion in other churches, specifically in the Catholic Church. They think that means you must go and confess your sins to a priest in order to be forgiven. This is their proof text for that doctrine right here. However, when this passage is read and understood in its proper context, Jesus is giving a Great Commission to go and preach the forgiveness of sins to all nations. That's what he sent His disciples to do. In this passage, Jesus is not commissioning His disciples to hear confessions and absolve future disciples of their sins. No, the Lord is commanding them to baptize new disciples for the remission of sins. That is why He continues by saying, "And if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." It is not that the

apostles had a choice that, when someone came and confessed their sins to them, they could choose to forgive or not forgive them. Rather, what Jesus is saying here is that those who the apostles baptize receive the forgiveness of sins, and those they do not baptize do not receive forgiveness. As I said earlier, Christians are divinely authorized distributors of eternal life. We are authorized by Jesus Christ, and having the approval stamp of the Holy Spirit, we are authorized to share it. John 20:21-23, as well as the other accounts of the Great Commission, is the record of Jesus' authorization.

We have eternal life ourselves, but we're authorized to give that to other people. We are all authorized distributors of the eternal life which only God gives. Jesus has given us eternal life, and we can give it to others. That is, He uses us to give it to others. The first time this happened is when Peter said, "Repent and be baptized in name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." "And that day about three thousand souls were added to them [the disciples]" (Acts 2:41). Thus, the church was born. We are still the same church today. So, we should still be carrying on the same practices and mission as the church at its founding.

The Power of the Great Commission

The last thing Jesus says to Matthew is "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Jesus promise to his disciples is, "I am with you." The Holy Spirit is the indwelling presence of Jesus Christ Himself. Speaking of the Spirit's coming, Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphans. I will come to you (John 14:14). Paul described this indwelling Holy Spirit as, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," (Colossians 1:27).

Now here is how Jesus' spiritual presence with us and in us is described in Mark. "These signs shall follow them that believe in my name," followed by a list of powerful signs of the Spirit of Jesus Christ working through us: "They will cast out demons. They will speak in new tongues. They will take up serpents. If they drink any deadly thing, it will by no means hurt them. They will lay hands on the sick and they will recover." These miraculous signs are to follow believers, and this is parallel to Matthew's quote in which Jesus says, "I am with you always," because when we have Jesus in us and we are yielded to him, letting him work in and through us, he is going to perform many mighty works through us, just as he did when physically present here on earth, and just as he did through Peter, Paul, and the rest of the apostles. Just as in Luke, where Jesus lists the details of the gospel rather than merely saying, "Go and make disciples," or, "Go preach the Gospel," saying instead, "That the Christ had to suffer and die and rise again the third day," in Mark, Jesus lists the actions, or fruits, that take appear in your life if the Holy Spirit is working through you. He didn't tell his disciples, "These things will follow you who believe in my name," but, "those who believe in my name." They will heal the sick. They will speak with new tongues, and they will cast out demons. They will be protected from serpents or deadly poison.

Finally, in Luke, Jesus refers to His spiritual presence in his disciples as, "the promise of My Father," "the Holy Spirit," and "power from on high." John simply recounts, "Jesus breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" What does Acts 2:38 promise? If you "repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins... you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Fulfilling the Mission

The church's mission to "make disciples of all nations" is about more than just making converts. We are to go out into all the world to be Christ's ambassadors so that we as the disciples of Christ can bring other disciples to Christ. And it's vitally important that we have an environment of ongoing, biblical discipleship to bring them into. It's important that we as the church provide a place where newborn disciples can and will be nurtured and grow. God does not save us to be "lone ranger" Christians, but to be brothers and sisters in His spiritual family, to be living bricks that make up His spiritual house. We are called to be the church, not merely individual Christians, but a collective, corporate body of disciples.

After we give them the gospel, and they accept it, we baptize them. After we baptize them, we teach them all things, and these signs shall follow them that believe in Jesus, because if they're really committed to Christ, God is going to do an awesome work in their lives. The emphasis is on community. We have a community to bring them into. Effective evangelism is where it starts. It is where discipleship starts, and that's where we all started as disciples of Jesus. One good indication that we are growing up in the Lord is if we are multiplying. We multiply ourselves by making other disciples. Evangelism is fulfilling the first duty that the Lord Jesus gave to us, His church, in the Great Commission.

There are two parts to this. The first is evangelism, seeking and saving that which was lost. Seeking and saving are two S's. This means always being on the lookout for people who need to be saved and always being ready to give a defense or a presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This means being wary, but also being prepared to follow through. You are in the "seeking and saving" stage up until the person has been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and received the Holy Spirit. The second part is raising and releasing, two R's.

First seeking and saving, and then raising and releasing. This second stage of evangelism starts at conversion, after a person has been baptized and received the Spirit. This second stage is what is commonly referred to as "discipleship." Raising a Christian, like raising a child, takes time, energy, and intentionality. As the child grows, he learns how to walk, to talk, to eat, and to depend on his parents. As the Christian grows, he learns how to pray and spend time with the Lord, how to read and study God's Word, how to love the brethren, and how to depend more and more on the Spirit of God in this life. Just as the child's growth cannot occur in a healthy way apart from the family unit, even so the Christian cannot achieve adequate spiritual growth apart from the love, care, and fellowship of a healthy, authentic church family. The kind of growth that Christians need is not automatic. It needs to be intentionally cultivated. Raising a Christian is a process that needs to be purposefully planned and practiced in order to effectively achieve desirable results.

This is where releasing comes in. When we bring new disciples into the church, we bring them into a training ground in which they can get equipped with what they need to grow up in Christ, to become more like Him, with the purpose of living a life pleasing to Him, a life just like His.

In real churches, every Christian is being trained for a purpose, for a ministry, and then being empowered to do the ministry he or she has been trained to do, not held down or prevented from blooming into a powerful vessel of God's anointing. Let us not become churches that, when God places a call on a person's life, the church is deaf to it. And worse, if that person is to obey God's calling, he or she is left no possibility, no other option, but to leave our church or churches because they are so married to a programmatic, robotic, mechanical routine of putting on a service or "playing church" that they are just not conducive to the moving of God in the lives of His children. Let us not be found to be so resistant to the work of God's Spirit that there is just no way for His saints to do the ministry in our midst. What a sight it will be when many pastors and ministry leaders face Jesus Christ expecting vast eternal rewards for their years of service, only to find out that what they built was pure straw and actually hindered the work of the gospel rather than furthered it.

Remember the 3 E's of Discipleship! In this article I have been giving illustrations of growing into spiritual maturity, but how I define discipleship is with three E's: educate, equip, and empower. That is how we make sure that we are truly being discipled, and that is how we as disciplers make sure that we are truly discipling others. Authentic discipleship educates, equips, and empowers other believers to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and to fulfill his final command prior to his ascension, which is to continue the process of making disciples in his name until all nations are reached. Discipleship begins by converting them to Christianity through baptism, a process called evangelism, but it does not stop there. It continues by teaching the new converts to observe everything that Jesus has commanded us in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments.

That is also how we make sure we are discipling others. We educate them, or we help facilitate their education in a very intentional and strategic way. We equip them directly, or we help by enabling their equipping and ensuring that it happens. We either empower them ourselves, if we are in a position to do so, or we encourage their empowerment for effective service both inside and outside of the church.