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CHURCH PLANTING INSIGHTS: THE GREAT COMMISSION /S CHURCH PLANTING

Dave Earley

The ultimate fulfillment of the Great Commission is Church Planting! Any Great Commission initiative that does not result in the forming of new churches misses the mark. Let me explain.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He laid out for His followers the desires He most deeply longed for them to fulfill. Repeatedly, Jesus gave a command that has become known as the Great Commission. The writers of the Gospels record Jesus giving His Great Commission five times. The fullest statement of the Great Commission is found in Matthew 28.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20; see also Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

Elmer Towns and Douglas Porter give several reasons why this command is called “great.”

Perhaps using the word “great” to describe the Great Commission is not such a bad idea, after all. God has taken a “great” risk. We have been entrusted with a “great” message. We also face a “great” responsibility in taking the gospel to our world. But to partner with the Holy Spirit and witness in the fullness of God’s power, what a “great” opportunity. And as others come to faith in Christ as a result of our witness, well, that would be “great.”¹

When the Great Commission is analyzed more closely, it reveals several important practices essential to fulfilling the mandate. Each must be taken very seriously.

Intentionally Pursue the Lost: GO!

The first practice needed to fulfill the Great Commission is the intentional pursuit of the lost. Just as He was sent by His Father, Jesus has sent us out in a deliberate quest to win non-believers to faith in Christ (John 20:21, 31). This notion is also revealed in the use of the word “go” found at the beginning of the Commission (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15). Malphurs provides insight into the importance of the word “go” and the practice of this concept.

The Savior clarifies what He means by this word in such passages as Luke 5:27-32, 15:1-10, and 19:1-10, where He develops the concept of seeking lost people such as Levi the tax-gatherer and his friends, tax-gathers and sinners

¹Ibid., 36.

in general, and Zachaeus. Far too many churches at the end of the twentieth century are waiting for lost people to come to them . . . the twentieth-century church will have to take the initiative and pursue these lost people.²

Jesus told several parables to reveal the importance of intentionally seeking the lost. In Luke 15, Jesus is being rebuked by Pharisees because He has gone to eat with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 15:1-2). Jesus then tells of the shepherd who leaves his flock of 99 sheep to find the one that is lost (Luke 15:3-6). The joy of the shepherd over finding his one lost sheep is compared with the joy in heaven when a lost sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). Next, Jesus tells of a woman who diligently searches to find one lost coin. Again, this is compared with the great joy in heaven when one lost sinner repents (Luke 15:8-10).

Later, Luke's Gospel tells of Jesus reaching out to a tax collector named Zacchaeus. After inviting himself to dinner and proclaiming the coming of salvation to Zacchaeus' house, Jesus explains by stating, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:1-10).

This intentional pursuit of the lost is to reach "all creation" (Mark 16:15). New Testament commentator Alan Cole makes the point that the post resurrection ministry of the disciples was not to focus merely on the Jews, but was now to extend "to all mankind without distinction."³ The preaching of the gospel must extend to "all nations" (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47) and reach "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The church's mission is linked to His mission. This mission proceeds from His mission.⁴ As Jesus sent, so He sends His disciples (John 20:21). Just as Jesus left heaven to come to earth, believers must not be content to stay at home. The church must go!

Preach the Gospel: *TELL!*

The second practice needed to fulfill the Great Commission is evangelism. Christians have to tell non-believers the message of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection for their sins. The Commission states that "repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be preached" (Luke 24:47). Believers are to "preach the good news" with the goal of leading them to "believe" (Mark 16:15). The result of preaching the gospel should be "making disciples" (Matt. 28:19). The content of the gospel is found in 1 Corinthians 15, where the apostle Paul writes,

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance

²Malphurs, 42.

³Alan Cole, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1961), 261.

⁴Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 846.

that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:1-4).

Baptize Converts: *BAPTIZE!*

The third action that must be taken in fulfilling the Great Commission is “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). This involves incorporating them into the group of people who identify themselves by the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in other words, the church. Since baptism is an ordinance of the local church, it is obvious that the Great Commission cannot be fulfilled without the creation of local churches.

Teach and Train Believers: *DISCIPLE!*

It is not enough to pursue the lost, win them to Christ, and baptize them. The fulfillment of the Great Commission requires obeying Jesus’ words to be “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). The process does not stop at baptism. In order to fulfill the commission, the believer must be taught to live the teachings of Jesus. As William Hendricksen writes, “The truth learned must be practiced.”⁵ The best place for a young believer to be taught is in the local church. There they not only hear the Word, but also have abundant opportunity to put it into practice.

Conclusions

After examining the Great Commission, the obvious question that begs to be answered is, “How does God expect His followers to implement it?” The obvious answer is, “by planting churches.”

Church planting involves all the elements of the fulfilling the Great Commission. Churches result from Christians invading a culture, preaching the gospel, baptizing believers, and training them to live for Christ.

According Aubrey Malphurs, “**A careful reading of Acts reveals that the early church implemented the Great Commission mandate primarily by planting churches.**”⁶ This view is seconded by Ed Stetzer, who writes, “It is evident that the first hearers of the Great Commission assumed its fulfillment required multiplying disciples and forming new congregations. The early church fulfilled the Great Commission by planting churches . . . the best indication of what Jesus meant can be found in how the hearers responded.”⁷

Stetzer adds, “New Testament Christians acted out these commands as any

⁵William Hendricksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973), 1000.

⁶Malphurs, 43.

⁷Ibid., 36.

spiritually healthy, obedient believers would; they planted more New Testament churches”⁸ He concludes, “**The Great Commission is church planting.**”⁹

As Malphurs and Stetzer attest, the way the first followers of Jesus carried out the Great Commission directly resulted in the planting of churches. Peter (and others) preached the Gospel (Acts 2:14-36), the people were baptized (Acts 2:37-41), and the baptized believers were immediately incorporated into the life of obeying what Jesus had taught (Acts 2:42-47).

The ultimate fulfillment of the Great Commission is Church Planting!

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⁸Ibid., 37.

⁹Ibid., 35. Author’s emphasis.

