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The Great Commission

Matt 28:18-20

Don Fanning¹

Few words have changed the course of history of mankind as those of the Great Commission. From eternity past God's plans and heaven's interest in human events have pointed toward the redemption of sinful man and a cursed creation. As humans we can never imagine the full significance of Calvary's agony under God's wrath for sin's payment and the exaltation as the victorious risen Savior finishes His earthly task planned from before Creation. Nothing has ever been more important to the God of heaven. Obviously, the Father, especially the Son, and the Holy Spirit want the news of what was accomplished on the Cross to be announced and explained to the whole world.

Following the resurrection, there were five reiterations of the Great Commission, one in each of the Gospels and the Book of Acts (Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:8). It is called the "Great" Commission because of the final emphasis He gave it before the Ascension. This is what the disciples and all the church were to be about. There is little argument that these declarations are the guiding principles of the life of Jesus, and that He seeks to impart them to His followers.

There is an enormous volume of serious literature in many languages dealing with it - scores of thousands of books, monographs, essays, articles. Every year some 10,000 new bibliographical items on evangelization are added. The vast majority expounds and analyzes the subject from the standpoint of normative Christian theology - what the Bible says, what Christian mission requires, how it should be implemented. In short, what Christians ought to do about it; how Christians ought to obey Christ's Great Commission...Very little writing on the subject has faced, however, the harsh reality that Christians have, throughout history, not obeyed but disobeyed, and are today still disobeying, that Commission.²

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² David B. Barrett, "Envisioning the Future in World Evangelization." *Review and Expositor*. 90, no. 1, (Winter, 1993): 9.

Instructions to go to Galilee

Jesus had earlier told his disciples after the resurrection to meet him in Galilee. “But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee” (Matt 26:32).³ Then after appearing to the women at the grave, the angel said, “Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed he is going before you into Galilee; There you will see him. Behold, I have told you” (Matt 28:7).

As the women were going to tell the disciples, “Behold, Jesus met them, saying, ‘Rejoice!’ So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me” (Matt 28:9-10). This privileged and intimate encounter erupted in a moment of profound worship as they “held Him by the feet and worshiped Him.”

One can imagine that they did not want this moment to pass, but John wrote that Jesus had to break this moment of elation to keep the women focused on their mission, as He said literally, “do not [keep on] touch[ing] me”⁴ in John 20:17. He adds, “Go and tell my brethren” (28:10) to keep the women on their mission. There is a time to worship and a time to finish the task, thus the text adds, “Now while they were going...” (28:11).

The disciples got the message and immediately “the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them” (Matt 28:16), where Jesus’ ministry had begun three years previous in “Galilee of the Gentiles,” perhaps as a hint of what was to come.

The direct line walking distance to Galilee is about 68 miles going through Samaria. If they avoided Samaria, as they typically would have, the distance is around 90 miles, walking down to the Jordan valley, then north to the Sea of Galilee. If the average adult walking pace is about 4 mph, the journey would take seventeen hours taking the direct route, or five or six hours more if they went by way of the Jordan valley. One wonders which route they took.

This appearance of Jesus was the tenth post-resurrection appearance of eleven appearances before the ascension, followed by an additional six post-ascension appearances (Stephen, Acts 7:55-56; four times to Paul, Acts 9:3-6; 20:24; 22:17-21; 23:11; finally, to John, Rev 1:12-20).

When they arrived at the mountain in Galilee and first saw Him “they worshiped Him; but some doubted” (Matt 28:17). The first part of the sentence makes sense but the last phrase seems out of phase with the enthusiasm for the risen Savior. How could some still doubt? Their minds must have been full of

³ If no indication is given the verses in this paper will be the New King James Version.

⁴ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 513.

questions about what has happened. The verb *distazo* can mean to “waver”⁵ or “be of two minds about something.”⁶

The word is only used twice in the NT. The other use is in Matt 14:31, “And immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’” Peter had just walked on water! However, when he saw the danger he was in, he became afraid. It was not the lack of total faith, but the application of the faith principle in this situation; that is, could Peter trust Jesus in every situation regardless of how difficult or impossible.

The meaning of “some” (*hoi de*) is used in Matt 26:67 to refer to a “smaller subgroup of a larger group who have been subjects of the preceding verbs.”⁷ Though there may have been others present (possibly implied in Acts 1:21), none are indicated in the text.

Perhaps some of them now were “of little faith,” or unable to assimilate the significance or meaning of all that was happening. Donald Hagner writes, “It is precisely in this state of mind that ... Jesus’ words will accomplish what the sight of the risen Jesus alone could not.”⁸ However, Matthew does not record the resolution of their doubting minds. “To such people, who are far from being perfect, Jesus gives the commission to make disciples of the nations.”⁹

The Great Commission to follow is not delivered to spiritual giants of the faith, but to struggling followers of Christ full of prejudices, misunderstanding, and questions. They love Him, even though they have barely an inkling of who He is. Staggering under the implications of what they have witnessed, that no man in history had ever seen, frightened because of their past failures, and having a thousand questions about what they are going to do now, they watch as Jesus comes closer and gives them a general mandate that will be the driving objective of His church until He returns.

Matthew 28: 18-20

The active verbal commands in this passage (going, discipling, baptizing, and teaching) are sandwiched between two encouraging and motivational declarations

⁵ Joseph Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publication, 1996), Ref. 1442.

⁶ Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg and Neva F. Mille, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. (Victoria, BC, Canada: Trafford Publishing, 2005), Ref. 6945.

⁷ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: a Commentary on the Greek Text. New International Greek Testament Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI.: W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 1262.

⁸ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*. Vol. 33B. *Word Biblical Commentary*. (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 885.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 886.

about His authority (28:18) and powerful presence (28:20) that have become the primary confidence builders for persecuted believers throughout the ages.

Preamble Declaration

^{NET} **Matthew 28:18** Then Jesus came up and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

By now the disciples were beginning to grasp the full picture of the incarnation, His sacrificial death and resurrection of the living Sovereign of the universe, Jesus Christ. Now He declares that He is holding His followers accountable for acting in His stead. They had witnessed Jesus do miracles, of which we know only a small part (John 21:25).

How long would He be among them in His resurrected form? What would they do if and when He were to leave them? Before He answers these questions, Jesus reveals His cosmic and eternal authority and power: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (28:18). The passive verb implies the action of the Father exalting the Son with absolute power as Jesus had told them earlier in ^{NET} Matthew 11:27, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father."¹⁰ Matthew repeatedly described Jesus as the One who had authority (Matt 7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1; 21:23, 24, 27). In His trial He could have called twelve legions of angels (Matt 26:53), but He chose not to use His authority in order to accomplish a greater objective.

It was not that Jesus did not have authority before the Incarnation, since He was the Creator (Col 1:16) and always the Sustainer of all things (Col 1:17^{NET}, "He himself is before all things and all things are *held together* in him"). The verb form is *sunistemi*, in the perfect tense and refers to a completed action in the past that does not need repeating. He never lacked authority, power or creative ability to accomplish His will at any moment in time.

Now the Creator had become part of His creation limiting Himself to become a Man under the authority of men, only to experience the rejection and reprisal of His own creation. After suffering the wrath of His Father for the sins of mankind and the wrath of men for daring to defy their false religious system while claiming to be God incarnate, now He stood on this mountain top as Victor over death and Savior of the world, but only a handful of people knew it.

As the first and only resurrected One (not resuscitated), He stood before His disciples with the claim of being the Absolute Ruler of the universe. Could they begin to grasp the implications of His claim? He was the only One who could move heaven and earth at His will and He was about to give these frail and failing

¹⁰ See also John 3:35.

men the most significant and impossible of all tasks, to announce the gospel to the world.

These disciples must have begun realizing that Jesus was the One Daniel wrote about concerning the “Ancient of Days” stating, “To him was given ruling authority, honor, and sovereignty. All peoples, nations, and language groups were serving him. His authority is eternal and will not pass away. His kingdom will not be destroyed.” (Dan 7:13 ^{NET}) They were about to find out that those who became Christ followers were going to be the instruments He would use with all His authority and wisdom to bring “all peoples, nations, and language groups” to become Christ followers as well.

They would have to trust in His continued ability to appropriately intervene in real time even though He was not present (as in Matt 8:8-10 when Jesus healed the Centurion’s servant from a distance), and to commit their lives for the salvation of others, just as He had done. They would learn what He meant when He said, “Just as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” (John 20:21). It was as if He were saying, “I came to die to save sinners, now I want you to live to save sinners.”

Just as Jesus counted on the authority of His Father to control the circumstances and resources to enable Him to carry out His mission, now He expects His disciples to count on His authority to fulfill and obey all His commands as He did in obedience to the Father’s will. The declaration means that He will exercise His full “authority in heaven and earth” in order to accomplish His purpose in the world and in and through their lives, and ours.

Commands

Following an immense declaration of being all powerful, i.e. sovereign, He gives the Great Commission that was to be followed to carry the message to every “nation.” It is to be in effect “until the end of the age,” that is, when Christ returns.

The connector, “therefore” (*oun*) ties verses 18 and 19 together introducing the reasonableness of the action demanded. Lenski wrote, “The *oun* shows that what otherwise would be absolutely impossible now becomes gloriously possible, yea, an assured reality.”¹¹ Because Jesus has global authority (v. 18) He will demand a global task that He will enable to be accomplished (v. 19).

In Matt 28:19-20 there are four verb forms, but only one is an imperative verb, “make disciples.” The other three verb forms, “going,” “baptizing” and “teaching” are verbal participles in Greek, meaning that these three are dependent upon the force of the single main verb, “make disciples.”

¹¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*. (Minneapolis, MN.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 1172.

Go “Therefore go...” (Matt 28:19a)

The first participle is in the aorist voice, which ties it to the aorist active imperative verb in a common structure called an “attendant circumstance” participle¹² defined as an aorist participle preceding an aorist main verb.

This means that semantically the action of “going” is commanded, just as “making disciples” is. As for the two participles that follow the main verb (*baptizantes*, “baptizing”; and *didaskontes*, “teaching”), these do not fit the normal pattern for attendant circumstance participles, since they are present participles and follow the aorist main verb. However, some interpreters do see them as carrying additional imperative force in context. Others regard them as means, manner, or even result.¹³

In the structure, the two words are inseparably linked. The meaning implied becomes “Go [with an implied urgency of the aorist imperative] and immediately begin to make disciples of all nations” (28:19). Since the primary objective of the verb is “all nations” the disciples must go to them and not expect all nations to come to them. Rogers states, “Without the action of the participle having taken place it would not be possible to carry out the command.”¹⁴

It is still dependent semantically, because it cannot exist without the main verb. It is translated as a finite verb connected to the main verb by “and.” The participle then, in effect, “piggy-backs” on the mood of the main verb. This usage is relatively common, but widely misunderstood.¹⁵

Initially Jesus had commanded His disciples to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:6; 15:24). Since Abraham, God had chosen to focus His revelation of salvation for all the nations through Israel using them as emissaries to launch His message, thus the emphasis on “to the Jew first” (Rom 1:16; John 4:22). When Israel repeatedly and finally rejected their Messiah-Savior, the message had to go to the rest of the world through any Christ follower (Acts 28:27-28).

¹² Wallace, *Basic Greek Grammar*, 645.

¹³ Biblical Studies Press, 2006, Matt 28:19.

¹⁴ Cleon Rogers. “The Great Commission.” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 130, no. 519 (July, 1973): 261.

¹⁵ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 640.

Make disciples “And make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19b)

The main verbal thrust therefore is “to make disciples,” the only verb in the verse. All these listeners were disciples, so they knew what it took to bring them to discipleship; from disbelief or indifference to become totally committed followers of Christ. Jesus had come to them, confronted them personally and challenged them to learn from Him. Now He would no longer be doing this process. They were to follow His ministry model and get others to repeat the process. He had made them “fishers of men” (Matt 4:19), now they were to go wherever the “fish” were located, and so are we today.

The meaning of a “disciple” is to be “a learner, pupil...one who follows one’s teaching.”¹⁶ In the verb form *matheteuo* means “instruct, cause someone to become a follower”¹⁷. Drumwright says the aorist mood of the imperative is “usually a note of urgency.”¹⁸ Wallace describes the aorist imperative as to mean “urgent” stating, “The stress is on the urgency of the action...on the solemnity and urgency of the action.. ‘Make this your top priority.’”¹⁹ Boyer agrees that the aorist imperative can mean “urgent” in the sense that it ...

“might be related to the time issue, to priority; it might be demanding first attention, ‘right now,’ or ‘as soon as possible.’ Some justification for such a use of the term may be found in the unquestioned fact that the aorist is often occasional, used to answer questions like ‘What shall I do?’ These are usually asked when a decision is pending.”²⁰

Jesus as a Discipler

Jesus had poured His life into these followers and now He tells them to go find others and do the same ministry to them that they had experienced. Nothing conveys the desires of the heart like the last command. He wanted His church to evangelize the world because it needed to be evangelized or be lost forever.

The extent of Jesus’ discipling ministry of three years can only be implied from these glimpses into His ministry. Jesus “appointed twelve that they might be with Him that He might send them out to preach” (Mark 3:14). This group was

¹⁶ Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ref. 3284.

¹⁷ Friberg, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Ref. 17628.

¹⁸ H. L. Drumwright, *An Introduction to New Testament Greek*, (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 130.

¹⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 205-206.

²⁰ James L. Boyer, “A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study.” *Grace Theological Journal*, 8, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 46.

chosen evidently from a larger group of disciples or followers as is evident from the selection process of Judas' replacement.

The Eleven chose two candidates from a larger group of disciples who had “accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection” (Acts 1:21-22). We know little to nothing of this group of men who accompanied the Apostles, but who were disciple, alongside of the original Twelve.

Likewise in Luke 10 the Lord “appointed seventy-two others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go” (Luke 10:1). It makes sense that this group was considered the faithful and capable ones chosen out of a larger group of disciples to partner in His ministry.

After the resurrection Peter led a group of “disciples [*mathetes*] (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty)...” (Acts 1:15). Jesus' discipling model of ministry was then imitated in the Early Church.

They just did what was done to them. Likewise, the Jewish culture had an educational model that was built on a disciple or apprentice model. Rogers describes the concept of the command to “make disciples” in the Jewish culture:

The word can also have a causative meaning, “to make a disciple,” which is true here. The question then is what is a disciple and what did the command “make disciples” convey? Although the word in general is said to mean a person who binds himself to another in order to acquire his knowledge and understanding, it is the rabbinical or Jewish context which must be observed here. ...The teacher or scribe was one who himself had gone through a rigorous study to master both Scripture and tradition... Because of his great learning and ability, the teacher was looked upon as a man of great authority and high esteem. ... The students lived in close fellowship with their teacher. They travelled with him, ate with him, attended weddings or other festive occasions with him. The students of a teacher were characterized by complete submission to the authority of the teacher, as well as by a devotion to him which was to surpass devotion to father or mother and which displayed itself in service to the teacher. The teaching or learning method was to sit at the feet of the teacher listening to him; to engage in a question and answer encounter with the teacher; to observe the actions of the teacher, especially how he conducted himself in regard to the Law or solved problems of conduct through his knowledge of Law and tradition... After the strenuous studies the student was ordained through the laying on of hands and received the right to be called Rabbi. He

then had the responsibility to pass on that which he had learned from his teacher and to make disciples.²¹

Paul as a discipler

Even though there is no reference to the Great Commission in Paul's writings, making disciples became the normal thing to do in the Early Church. Paul received his own Great Commission that was remarkably like the Great Commission of Matthew, Luke and Acts (1:8) combined: "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance." (Act 26:19-20).

Paul had been instructed at his conversion on the Damascus Road how to focus his discipling ministry:

"Get up and stand on your feet, for I have appeared to you for this reason, to designate you in advance as a servant and witness to the things you have seen and to the things in which I will appear to you.¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you¹⁸ to open their eyes so that they turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me." (Acts 26:16-18 ^{NET}).

Paul then spent three years apparently learning directly from Jesus: "nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those *who were* apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days" (Gal 1:17-18). He made it clear that he did not "immediately confer with flesh and blood" (Gal 1:16) because he had learned his teachings from the resurrected Christ. When Paul went to Jerusalem he spent two weeks with Peter (1:18) and the only other church leader he saw was "James the Lord's brother" (1:19). Paul's doctrine and practice did not come from the Apostles or the church at Jerusalem. He was disciplined and taught directly by Jesus for three years.

To explain his authority Paul introduced his teaching on the Lord's Supper by saying, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you..." (1Cor 11:23). Likewise his instructions to the Corinthians did not originate from Paul. He said, "The things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor 14:37). He was taught directly by the Lord, which was part of a special

²¹ Cleon Rogers, "The Great Commission." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130, no. 519 (July, 1973), 263-265.

post-resurrection discipleship. We surmise that this training occurred during his three years in Arabia. Whatever he was taught by Jesus he then taught his disciples.

More is recorded of the application of the Great Commission in the ministry of the Apostle Paul than the other Twelve, because he was designated “an apostle to the Gentiles” [*ethne*] (Rom 11:13) and “a teacher of the Gentiles” [*ethne*] (2 Tim 1:11). This is the same word used in Matt 24:14 and 28:19 for “nations.”

Paul declared, “So I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation,” (Rom 15:20). His focus was to “preach the gospel in the regions beyond [Corinth] and not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment” (2 Cor 10:16). Paul constantly sought to preach the gospel “to the ends of the earth,” such that after a twenty-five year ministry he claimed that from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern day Croatia-Bosnia), “I have fully preached the gospel of Christ” (Rom 15:19).

Paul was not saying that there was no more ministry to be done in these areas, but rather that he had raised up some Christ followers who would carry on after he left. Paul described those who worked along side him as “fellow workers” using the word *sunergos*, “a partner, assistant or companion.”²² Those receiving this designated association with Paul included Priscilla and Aquila (Rom 16:3), Mary (Rom 16:6), Urbanus and Stachys (Rom 16:9), Tryphena, Trophosa and Persis (Rom 16:12), Timothy (Rom 16:21), Titus (2 Cor 8:23), Epaphraditus (Phil 2:25), Euodia and Syntyche, Clement and the rest (Phil 4:2-3), Aristarcus and Mark (Col 4:1), Demas, Luke (Phil 1:24), and Phylemon (Phile 1). Others of Paul's “companions” (*sunekdemos*, “fellow traveller”) included Gaius (Acts 19:29), Sopater, Secundus, Tychicus, and Trophimus (Acts 20:4). This may only be a representative list of men and women who worked with Paul in spreading the gospel and organizing disciples in groups that became churches. Some of the initial characteristics that a discipler looks for are described by John MacArthur:

A true convert is a disciple, a person who has accepted and submitted himself to Jesus Christ, whatever that may mean or demand. The truly converted person is filled with the Holy Spirit and given a new nature that yearns to obey and worship the Lord who has saved him. Even when he is disobedient, he knows he is living against the grain of his new nature, which is to honor and please the Lord. He loves righteousness and hates sin, including his own.²³

By Acts 6 “the number of disciples was multiplying” (6:1), then the “number of disciples was multiplied greatly” (6:7). Paul took Jesus' example as his ministry

²² Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Ref. 5081.

²³ John F. MacArthur, *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 341.

philosophy and basic strategy as noted in ^{NET} Acts 14:21, “After they had proclaimed the good news in that city and made many *disciples*, they returned to Lystra, to Iconium, and to Antioch.” This is the only verbal usage of “disciple” (*matheteuein*) outside of Matthew’s Gospel where it is linked closely to *euaggelisamenoi*, “having evangelized.”

This is “beach head” evangelism that includes disciple-making and strategic church planting in a relative short timeframe. Hultgren commented, “The only way to comprehend what Paul has written [in Romans 15:19] is that Paul here does not think in terms of individual persons but instead of “nations.”²⁴ Paul’s strategy was not the maximum number of those evangelized, but to “establish” (Col 2:7) a group of disciples in every major region of the Roman Empire in the East. As he modeled the ministry and evangelism (Acts 15:26) these disciples soon were risking their lives for the gospel as well (as for example Pricilla and Aquila – Rom 16:4).

Once strategic ministries were planted Paul sought to assure that his disciples were well established (Rom 1:11; 16:25; Col 2:7; 1 Thess 3:2, 13; 2 Thess 2:17) and taught them so they could evangelize and train other disciples (2 Tim 2:2). Keeping the balance between evangelism (especially pioneer-evangelism) and establishing the new disciple is still the ongoing challenge of the ministry.

Paul was determined to complete the establishing of the men and churches in Ephesus before he sought to pioneer another area (Rom 15:22-23). Then he planned to start some evangelistic discipling churches in Spain (Rom 15:24, 28) after a trip to Jerusalem to deliver an offering for the poor (Rom 15:25). Paul’s plans were to stop by Rome en route to Spain (Rom 15:24), but his plans were changed. He would be arrested and spend the next five to six years in prison, from which he would write the “Prison Epistles,” and during his unplanned lengthy stay in Rome he took advantage of every opportunity to make disciples (Acts 28:15-23) and clearly present the gospel before the court in Rome (2 Tim 4:17). His strategy was built around the completion of equipping his disciples to be “laborers.”

Eckhard Schnabel explains Paul’s on-going disciple-making strategy even after the churches were planted:

He repeatedly visited the churches he had established in Galatia, Macedonia and Achaia; he stayed for several years in Corinth and in Ephesus; he took time to write letters, to train new workers whom he sent to the existing churches with various tasks. Paul’s main concern evidently was not to reach as many people as quickly as possible with the gospel. He

²⁴ Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Gospel and Mission: The Outlook from His Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 132.

spared no effort, time and energy in safeguarding the consolidation of his missionary “successes.”²⁵

This process takes time. One cannot trust what one does not understand, nor follow what one does not believe to be absolutely true. A missionary friend to the ten/forty window told me that it takes about two or three years to make a disciple into a discipler. This, ultimately, is the objective of evangelism. Hagner sums it up,

“The emphasis in the commission thus falls not on the initial proclamation of the gospel, but more on the arduous task of nurturing into the experience of discipleship, an emphasis that is strengthened and explained by the instruction “teaching them to keep all that I have commanded” in v. 20a. To be a disciple in Matthew means above all to follow after righteousness as articulated in the teaching of Jesus.” (Hager, p. 887)

All nations

Disciple making was to be the methodology and the target audience was to be from “**all nations.**” The Great Commission is not just making disciples anywhere, but strategically making disciples in unreached “nations” or people groups. The word “nations” translates the word *ethne*, from which we have the English word “ethnic.” Today we use the term “ethnic people group” to define the many ethno-linguistic distinct groups of people that consider themselves different from other people because of their unique language, culture, and beliefs. The churches today largely ignore or are ignorant of these people groups. Most prayer lists in churches never include the names of any unreached people group.

For those who have never heard the gospel, 1.2 billion (about 24% of the world’s population), only minuscule human and financial resources are applied annually to diminish the gap. The overwhelming amount (over 90% of all the missionaries and 99.9% of all missions money) is appropriated for the part of the world already identified as Christian (more than 60% church members). ... Given this reality, can the 3,030 unreached population segments be evangelized this decade? No. Not even the next century.²⁶

Of the approximate 2 billion world “Christian” population in 2011, 279 million (12.8%) identify themselves as Pentecostals, 304 million (14%) as

²⁵ Ekhard Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1547.

²⁶ William R. O’Brien. “Strategies for World Evangelization.” *Review and Expositor*. (90, no. 1, 1993), 46.

Charismatics and 285 million (13:1%) as Evangelicals or Bible believing Christians.²⁷ The total of all three groups of evangelicals (868 million) is far less than the Roman Catholics “Christian” and only represents 12% of the global population, in spite of the enormous influx of believers in the past three decades.

Matthew has used this word *ethne* three times in his Gospel. In Matt 24:9, “You will be hated by all *nations* [*ethne*] for My name’s sake.” The very *ethne* that hate the Apostles became the people they were commanded to transform into disciples of Christ.

In Matt 24:14, these Jewish Apostles who typically despised the Gentiles were told that Jesus would not return until they, or their disciples, accomplished the mission of proclaiming the “gospel of the kingdom” to “all the nations [*ethne*], and then the end will come.” Finally, in Matt 25:32 the term is used of a final global judgment when “all the *ethne* will be gathered before Him.” The meaning is clear especially when defined in Revelation as “every tribe and tongue and people and nation [*ethne*]” (5:9).

In the beginning of Jesus’ ministry He had limited their target audience to Israel (cf. 10:5; 15:24) because Jesus’ purpose was “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24).

Jesus had alluded to an eventual broadening the ministry when He said, “Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). Now His disciples learned the mission of Jesus’ disciples would be described as bringing these “other sheep” into the fold and making them disciples just as Jesus had done to them. The earlier restriction to Israel would be lifted, and the world became the mission.

Jesus had said as much in the parable of the weeds in Matt 13:38, “The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom,” that is, the disciples are the seeds. Jesus had just declared, “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man” (13:37). Jesus will spread out His disciples throughout the world among the “tares” who “are the sons of the wicked one” (13:38).

However, for the first decade of the early church there was a reluctance to engage with the Gentiles; in fact, until Acts 11:19, when the disciples were “scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to *no one but the Jews only.*” (Author’s emphasis)

Elizabeth Dilling researched the Jewish writings, the Babylonian Talmud and the OT teachings to conclude how, in the Jewish tradition, the first century Pharisees twisted the Mosaic teachings in the Talmud to generate an emotional anti-Gentile sentiment that inevitably carried over into the behavior of the early

²⁷ Pew Research Center. “Christian Movements and Denominations.” Washington, D.C.: *Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life*, December 19, 2011.

Jewish believers. Dilling summarizes their attitude, as “Talmudism is the quintessence of distilled hatred and discrimination –without cause, against non-Jews.”²⁸ Jesus condemned these traditions (Matt 15:3, 6) saying, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition” (Mark 7:9). But deep-seated emotional attitudes are slow to change. Historically it would primarily take the persecution (Acts 8:1; 11:18) to drive the early Jewish Christians out of their home country into the Gentile world and that after several decades.

The People Groups

Thus, the Great Commission focus does not refer to geo-political boundaries of modern-day countries (i.e. Ghana, Iraq, or Colombia) but rather to the groupings of ethnic peoples who share the same language and culture, no matter where the geo-political boundaries of the modern day countries may be drawn on the map. Many countries have over a hundred “nations” or people groups within their borders.

By definition as defined by the Joshua Project, a people group is “a significantly large grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity with one another. For evangelization purposes, a people group is the largest group within which the Gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.”²⁹

When we were in Colombia, within a one-hour plane flight from our jungle base on the Brazilian border, there were 42 ethnic people groups (of the 111 in the whole country, according to the Joshua Project)³⁰, but all of these groups spoke unique and complicated primary languages distinct from each other, while only a few spoke Spanish. Most of these were tribal groups who were polylingual. As a result these groups will never hear the gospel until someone goes to them, learns their language, announces the gospel message, and makes disciples who can reach the other nearby tribal groups.

There are approximately 13,000 of these ethno-linguistic people groups in the world today.³¹ About half of them have little or absolutely no one in their language

²⁸ Elizabeth Dilling, *The Jewish Religion: Its Influence Today* (Chicago: The Elizabeth Dilling Foundation, 1983), 41

²⁹ “People Group” 2014 Joshua Project, U.S. Center for World Mission, Accessed March 20, 2014, <http://joshuaproject.net/help/definitions>.

³⁰ Accessed March 18, 2014, <http://joshuaproject.net/countries/CO>.

³¹ Definitions differ as to what constitute an *ethne*. There are 7,000 linguistic peoples (*Ethnologue*, <https://www.ethnologue.com>), or 13,000 ethno-linguistic peoples (World Christian Encyclopedia and Operation World, <http://www.operationworld.org>) and 16,000 ethnic peoples (Joshua Project, <http://joshuaproject.net>) or 27,000 unimax peoples, which marks every type of distinction, such as dialect, ethnicity, religion, caste, culture, education, politics, ideology, enmity, customs and behavior (US Center for World Mission, <http://www.uscwm.org>).

or culture that has ever heard the gospel even once. Many of these ethnic groups have been reached with the Gospel through the heroic efforts of different missions groups. Some groups are projected to integrate into other groups, thus losing their individual identity, but often this move makes them more accessible to hearing the gospel. This leaves approximately 4,000 unreached people groups (UPG). Several evangelical groups have initiated contact and linguistic works with over a thousand of these groups leaving just over 2,000 totally unengaged, unreached people groups (UUPG) at this date that need a missionary's intervention.

The task of reaching a UPG will take five years to master the language, followed by another five to ten years to translate the NT and establish a church that can continue evangelizing, teaching and discipling.

These groups should be the priority target for the church in order to fulfill the Great Commission. A number of churches are adopting a People Group, then partnering with various groups to facilitate establishing a church among their chosen groups. Most of these UPGs are in SE Asia, India and Africa.

As with the Apostle Paul, we do not have to win them all to Christ, but we must proclaim the gospel in a meaningful way to each *ethne* and make sufficient disciples among them to sustain growing indigenous churches. This is the task.

Many among the countries where the gospel is already planted hide behind the excuse that we have not won our entire nation to Christ, so why go somewhere else?

It seems best to assume that our Lord intended that some disciples should be converted as representatives from every ethnic people group, rather than that all the Church's efforts should be spent to win entire nations collectively and unanimously be made disciples. This would be great, but it was not Jesus' vision! According to Jesus, the vision in Revelation 7:9 of a multitude of the redeemed around God's throne at the end of all time who are "out of" every tribe, and tongue, and nation, and kindred."³²

The "beach head" ministry philosophy is the key to understanding the Great Commission. The vision presented in Revelation (5:9) at the beginning of the Tribulation Period is the presence of representatives from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation" or ethnic people that will be present at the opening of the Seven-Sealed scroll of the Tribulation Judgments. Someone will finish the task before the rapture. This reference carries a high value in the heavenly scene.

The problem is: if we focus on winning all the people in any one nation, then representatives from all the nations will never be reached.

³² George Martin, "Missions in the Pauline Epistles," John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith and Justice Anderson, *Missiology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holms Publishers, 1998), 72.

The emphasized Greek word in the Great Commission is the command “going” by the grammatical structure. George Martin discredits the common translation “as you are going” implying that followers of Jesus “must be sensitive to the presence of others around them who need to receive a witness.” He states, “this twists the force of the Greek construction and ignores the power of the context to reduce the meaning to a weakened ‘if you are going, then...’”³³

Quite the contrary, the command is an intentional, interventional, inconvenient, interruptive and out-of-the-ordinary “going” to an often “unimportant,” unappealing, unreached person or people with a specific objective in mind: to make believing followers of Jesus where none existed before just because Jesus said this is what He wanted and commanded to be done. This is not an option, nor is it merely for a select few. The task is to raise up a team effort of all believers of all churches to go and facilitate going to all the UPGs around the globe.

Baptize

“Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19b)

The second participle in the Matthew Great Commission is “baptizing” the followers as a first step of their obedience or public commitment to be a follower of Jesus and His teachings. In Spanish we called this step: *poner la camiseta de Jesús* [“put on the T-shirt of Jesus”]. There was to be no mistaking the new loyalty of the Christ follower. He was to be a public and unashamed follower of Jesus, not just have a secret mental “faith” experience.

The practice of the Early Church suggests that the command to baptize was universally applied to the new converts (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5). The triadic formula, “in the *name* of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” follows the singular *onoma*, “name,” indicating the unity of the three names, i.e., Father, Son and Holy Spirit.³⁴

As a result of the use of the singular “name,” in the Book of Acts the baptismal formula is often shortened to the “name of Jesus” or “the Lord Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27). In fact, the triadic formula is never used in the Book of Acts, but Hindson clarifies the issue by stating the references in Acts “in no way eliminate the significance of this formula given by

³³ Ibid., 73.

³⁴ Though the “Trinity” does not occur in the NT the three are referred to in Romans 8:11; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 4:4-6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13, as well as our present text.

Christ Himself.”³⁵ Matthew records the full meaning of the symbol or representation of the believer’s union with the entire Godhead.

The new believers were never to be ashamed of being identified with Jesus (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; Rom 1:16). Baptism declares our union with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4). Since “baptism” (*baptizo*) means “to dip, immerse or submerge” into something, the symbolism of being “put into” the body of Jesus Christ is best illustrated by the practice of immersion in water baptism (i.e., like He died, we are united in His death; like He was buried, we symbolically are buried or immersed under the water, and like He was resurrected, we are symbolically raised up out of the water to illustrate our new life in Christ). This mode publically demonstrates that our salvation is the result of being united with Christ by faith, since it is “not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Only by being united to Christ can we become acceptable to a holy God.

There is no salvific benefit to water baptism, since it is a symbol of the spiritual reality that must have already taken place within a believer for baptism to have any meaning.

Biblically it was always practiced in close proximity with the actual spiritual experience. At Pentecost the three thousand new believers were immediately baptized (Acts 2:41) as was the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:38). Paul was baptized soon after his conversion (9:18). Peter “commanded” Cornelius and his household to be baptized immediately after their conversion (10:48). As soon as the believers in Corinth heard and believed they were baptized (18:8). When the disciples of John heard the gospel and believed “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5).

These steps (going, making disciples of all ethnic people, and baptizing them) describe basic evangelism of declaring the amazing grace of God who is willing to forgive the repentant sinner of all his sins if they will trust Him completely, publicly and unashamedly.

Teach all the commands

“... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20a)

The final phrase of the Great Commission, “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded,” refers to the on-going training in all the commands of the NT. The phrase, *to obey*, means “to attend to carefully, or to guard a prisoner.”³⁶ It refers to a life-style of learning, remembering and practicing all the teaching commands of Jesus and the Holy Spirit throughout the NT. Due to the lack of

³⁵ Edward E. Hindson and Woodrow Michael Kroll, eds. *KJV Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 1963.

³⁶ Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, ref. 5282.

discipleship in the churches today, most Christians have no idea what these commands are that all disciples are expected to be learning to obey, much less participate in a small enough group that can hold each other accountable to practice what the commands mean. We are never meant to be independent Christians.

This commands refers back to the clear emphasis in Matt 5:19, “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” The commands Jesus gave us should be the primary content and focus of all our teaching and preaching.

John picked up a similar theme toward the end of the first century when he reiterated this priority in his Gospel, “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Then again he quotes Jesus saying, “He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him” (John 14:21).

The measure and mark of our love for and commitment to Jesus is evident by our commitment to learn and practice His instructions (John 14:24). David loved the commands from God, “For this reason I love your commands more than gold, even purest gold.” (Psa 119:127^{NET}).

The commands of Jesus extend throughout the NT by way of the revelation and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles and writers of the NT. Jesus continued to give more commands in the Epistles. The revelations of the Holy Spirit are identical to the words of Jesus. Paul put it this way: “If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord” (1 Cor 14:37). Every imperative that is applicable to contemporary believers should be treated as “commandments of the Lord” that must be taught in the churches.

The church is charged with the particular responsibility not only to find, teach and clarify the meaning of the commands, but to develop a structure to assure that new disciples make the commands their new way of life (“teaching them to obey...”). They were to take seriously Jesus’ words when He said, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My words; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:23). This is a new way of thinking about life that transforms “by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God” (Rom 12:2), that is, by mastering all the commands that He has given for us to obey together. It takes a team effort to practice the commands (as implied by the “one another” commands in the NT).

Perhaps the greatest neglect in the teachings of the church has been the lack of a systematic and comprehensive teaching of the commands of the NT. There

are nearly 400 imperative commands³⁷ that are applicable to the believer,³⁸ which we are expected to know and hold each other accountable to be obeying. It seems we have chosen to teach everything about theology except the commands.

Conclusion of the Great Commission

The vision of a chain of believers connected through the discipling process of learning of and trusting in the saving work of our Savior, openly being identified with Christ in baptism, then teaming together to help each other practice all His commands, is to go on multiplying until some from every people group on earth have been reached with the gospel and disciplined to know and live by the commands. The only reason that the Great Commission has not yet been accomplished by the twenty-first century is because some have broken the chain.

“If the Christians alive today were simply to commit themselves to multiplied disciple making, it would be mathematically possible to reach the world’s population by the fourth or fifth generation of new disciples. It is possible to fulfill the Great Commission in our generation!”³⁹

Final Assurance

“and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (NET Matt 28:20)

The final promise carries more impact than it is credited for. Throughout the OT, when people were assured that God was “with them” they were never afraid to take on impossible tasks. This assurance was all the encouragement they needed.

When Gideon asked for a miraculous sign (Judges 6:17), he was not asking to know the will of God, because he already knew it (Judges 6:14; then in 6:36). He was asking whether or not God would be with him in the battle. Once assured of God’s presence he did not care how impossible or difficult the mission would be (Judges 7:2-8). See other examples in Num 14:9; 2 Chron 32:7-8; and Psa 46:7, 11.

This promise, when believed and relied upon, brings all the confidence necessary for any disciple to face formidable odds, dangers and powerful opponents without fear or hesitation. Caleb said, “Assuming the LORD is with me, I will conquer them, as the LORD promised” (NET Josh 14:12), and he did. Jeremiah

³⁷ See Don Fanning, *Walking His Way*, (Forest, VA.: Branches Publications, 2013) for a complete list and explanation of a majority of the commands in the NT in a daily devotional Bible study format.

³⁸ This number reflects only the imperative forms applicable today, so it does not include other imperatival uses such as infinitives, third-person imperative usage or aorist subjunctives, or other imperatival usages.

³⁹ Terry, et al., *Missiology*, 74.

took his confidence from this same promise: “But the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One” (Jeremiah 20:11) (or NIV “like a mighty warrior”). With a Partner like this any task is accomplishable... even world evangelism.

In the OT this promise is primarily given to special leaders for strategic purposes, but in the NT it is promised to every disciple throughout the church age.

This last promise in Matthew extends beyond the life span of the Apostles to every believer that commits to the task of raising up a group of Christ-followers among every ethno-linguistic people groups on earth “to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20b). This phrase is also found in Matt 13:39-40, 49; 24:3, which refer to the end of the present age when the Son of Man returns to establish His kingdom. Thus the promise not only applied to these 1st century disciples, but to every disciple since then and until the end of the Church Age. We can count on His presence to empower and provide for the task.

The bottom line is: Jesus has promised to be an Almighty, powerful partner. If we knew the full implications of this promise and believed it, there would be no hesitation in our spirit to go anywhere or take on any task for the sake of the Gospel. It is only our ignorance of His promises, self-centeredness or unbelief that hinders our trust in His sufficient interventions to help us, the church, to accomplish the Great Commission. He is coming soon. Let’s be about finishing the task.