

"INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

Samuel M. Zwemer
Professor Emeritus of The History of Religion and Christian Missions,
Princeton Theological Seminary

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CHAPTER SIX

THE FIVEFOLD COMMISSION

“Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead)” (Galatians 1:1).

“And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-18).

Now that we have seen evidence for the genuineness and authenticity of the Great Commission as given in Matthew and Mark, we can turn our attention to the import and implications of these marching orders. First of all, we note that CHRIST's command to evangelize the world is given and recorded no less than five times in the Gospels. When we add the special commission given to Paul, the cumulative force of this reiterated command is evident.

The parallel passages appear on the following page. There never was a time when these apostolic-commissions, given once for all, were more relevant. "The whole trend of development, one discovers with awe, seems to confront the missionary movement with its original missionary motive." So declared Dr. Kraemer at the Madras Conference in 1938. And he went on to say: "This motive is the certitude of having the apostolic obligation towards the world of witnessing to CHRIST and His new kingdom. For all subsidiary arguments or motives, that have often usurped practically the place of the primary motive, are smitten to pieces under the hammer of the times. Recommending Christianity as the bringer of enlightenment and freedom, as a capital national and social tonic to make powerful nations, as the infallible guide to progress, has come to naught." [1]

<p style="text-align: center;">MATTHEW 28:18-20</p> <p>All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">JOHN 20:21-22</p> <p>As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">MARK 16:15</p> <p>Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">LUKE 24:46-49</p> <p>Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:8-10</p> <p>Ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">PAUL ACTS 26:13-18</p> <p>At midday, O King, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.</p>
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If such was true in 1938, how much more is it in 1943.

The primary basis of missions always was, and is today, the command of our Risen Lord. We do not mean that this command is the sole basis and ground of the missionary enterprise.

That enterprise has a six-fold foundation, although the command is specific and central, and CHRIST's commission to His apostles is based on each of the others.

1. The Will of GOD. This is what Paul calls "**the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus**" (Ephesians 3:11).

As we have it in one of the great hymns:

GOD from eternity hath willed
All flesh shall His salvation see;
So be the Father's love fulfilled,
The Saviour's sufferings crowned through Thee.

2. The Love of GOD. "**God so loved the world, that he gave.**" CHRIST died not for our sins only, but for the sins of the whole world.

3. The Command of GOD. "**Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.**" We are to go to all with the good news of redemption from sin. We are to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to help usher in the kingdom of righteousness and peace and joy.

4. The Promises of GOD. The exceeding great and precious promises in the Old and New Testament are "the blueprints" of the coming kingdom. We must build according to the pattern shown us by the patriarchs, prophets and apostles who foretold the glory of the New Jerusalem.

5. The Presence of GOD. "**Lo, I am with you alway.**" JESUS CHRIST is alive forevermore. He is our contemporary; the Head of the Church, the Commander of the faithful, the King and Emperor of the ages and the nations. Who dares to disobey His love?

6. The Power of GOD. The Holy Spirit witnesses in all lands, to this power of GOD through the Gospel. "**The works that I do shall ye do also and greater works than these shall ye do; because I go unto my Father.**" Such was the promise of Him who gave the Great Commission. In Him the will of GOD, the love of GOD, the command of GOD, the promise of GOD, the presence of GOD, and the power of GOD, are incarnate. In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

The fivefold command in the Gospels and the Acts is common in its central thought and aim, yet each of the evangelists, and Paul also, gives his own special emphasis through the Holy Spirit.

- Matthew emphasizes CHRIST's authority in this commission.
- Mark its universality in scope and result.
- Luke outlines the order of procedure – "**Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth**";
- John states the spiritual qualifications and demands - "**As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you**";
- Paul's statement of his call gives a new and startling interpretation to all the others.

The great Apostle to the Gentiles received his commission direct from heaven. He was appointed a minister and a witness, sent to open the eyes of the heathen, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan unto GOD.

Paul's own experience, in fact, interprets the great commission for us more deeply than any other scripture.

Frederic W. H. Myers has put some of it into his matchless poem; he makes Paul exclaim:

“Oft, when the word is on me to deliver,
Lifts the illusion and the truth lies bare;
Desert or throng, the city or the river,
Melts in a lucid Paradise of air -

“Only like souls I see the folk thereunder,
Bound who should conquer, slaves who should be kings -
Hearing their one hope with an empty wonder,
Sadly contented in a show of things;

“Then with a rush the intolerable craving
Shivers throughout me like a trumpet-call -
Oh, to save these! to perish for their saving,
Die for their life, be offered for them all.

The effect of the Great Commission on Paul was a transformation, a transfiguration of his whole character and life. **"Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!"**

The words in Matthew were spoken, it is generally agreed, not to the eleven apostles but to them and the five hundred brethren to whom Paul refers (I Corinthians 15:6). It was a general commission. CHRIST spoke as King in the consciousness of His resurrection-glory and of universal cosmic dominion. His Gospel is for all nations. He links His own Name with that of the Father and the Holy Spirit in Baptism. Equal in power and glory - one threefold Name above every name. And He seals His command with a promise of His presence always. "He is sometimes a GOD that hideth himself but never a GOD that absenteth himself; sometimes in the dark but never at a distance" (Matthew Henry). What a comfort to us in the present hour!

In Mark's Gospel we have greater detail of the results that would follow the proclamation of the Gospel to the whole creation. Only unbelief stumbles at this list of signs.

The history of Christian missions for nineteen centuries has confirmed every one of them.

Missionaries in China have cast out demons by prayer. Not only at Pentecost but through the Bible Societies men speak the Gospel with new tongues every year - over one thousand in all. As for the serpents and deadly things, there are many examples even in modern missions. The Moravian missionary, Christopher Dahne, lived among the Arawack Indians in Central America. He lived in a lonely hut in a dense forest among savage Indians. "One evening a snake suddenly glided down from the roof of his hut, and having bitten him twice or thrice coiled itself round his body. The brave missionary thought not of himself but of the people he came to save. If he were found dead it would be rumored that the natives had killed him. Seizing a piece of chalk he wrote on the table, 'A serpent has killed me.'

Then there flashed into his mind the words, "**They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them.**" Seizing the serpent, he flung it from him, and then lay down to sleep in perfect peace. Next morning he awoke feeling quite well." [2]

Luke in his Gospel and the Acts emphasizes the central message of the witnesses, namely, "**repentance and remission of sins . . . in his name.**"

But he also lays stress on the progressive order of evangelism. Beginning from Jerusalem the disciples are to bear witness "**in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.**"

This does not only indicate the progress of apostolic preaching from Jerusalem and beyond, and the actual great divisions of the book of Acts. It is of universal application. As we hope to show in a later chapter, every Christian witness should begin at his Jerusalem.

The same thing is true of the work of missions. We speak of a base on the coast, of stations and out-stations and of the regions beyond. Luke describes the wise, divine order for the spread of the Gospel for all time. By continuing in the Temple (Luke 24:53) the disciples remained faithful to the program of beginning at Jerusalem. After Pentecost and the persecution, following Stephen's martyrdom, they were scattered abroad but still it was everywhere "**to the Jew first**" and as long as possible.

John's version of the last command is short but deep.

JESUS showed the disciples "**his hands and his side.**" "**Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you; as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.**"

The whole emphasis is on the word "as." His followers must seek to labor in the same spirit, for the same witness, to share His suffering, to bear His cross, to have the print of the nails and the mark of the spear in their daily life.

In the words of Paul: "**to fill up that which is behind (lacking) of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church**" (Colossians 1:24).

It was from this text in John that Andrew Fuller preached the farewell sermon at the departure of William Carey on March 20, 1793. His outline was:

- The object you must keep in view;
- The directions you must observe;
- The difficulties you must encounter and the reward you may expect.

Carey experienced it all afterwards in Bengal and labored more abundantly than any of his contemporaries. "**As my Father hath sent me . . . Ye are my witnesses.**"

When JESUS CHRIST appeared to Saul on the way to Damascus he, too, must have seen the print of the nails and the mark of the spear by the celestial light that streamed from heaven.

"Why persecutest thou me? . . . I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake."

Therefore Paul sums up his own interpretation of his call to be an apostle in these words: **"I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake."**

Paul wrote to the early converts, **"Henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks (the scars) of the Lord Jesus."**

CHRIST the Son of GOD hath sent me
To the midnight lands;
Mine the mighty ordination
Of the pierced hands.

And so we find the message of the fivefold Great Commission not only repeated in the Gospels but interpreted in the life of Paul and the lives of all the apostolic succession.

The only adequate commentary on the last command of JESUS is in the lives of the apostles, saints and martyrs who down the ages have carried it out across the seven seas. No wonder that Horace Bushnell in his *Character of JESUS* finds here a striking proof of CHRIST's deity.

"He undertakes what is humanly impossible. Contrary to every religious prejudice of His time He undertakes to organize a kingdom of GOD . . . His purpose includes a new moral creation of the race - not of the Jews only and of men proselyted to their covenant but of the whole human race. He declared at an early date in His ministry that many shall come from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham in the kingdom of GOD . . . He also declared that His Gospel shall be published to all nations and gave His apostles their commission to go into all the world and publish His Gospel to every creature."

Upon this single fact Bushnell erects a complete argument "forbidding the possible classification of JESUS with men."

He is the Son of GOD who had all authority in heaven and on earth when He gave the Great Commission.

FOOTNOTES:

1 *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, p. 59.

2 Dr. John Ritson, *The Romance of Modern Missions*, p. 34.

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