

The Great Commission

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When the Triune God created man, He intended for man to enjoy a blessed and perfect fellowship with his Creator. But man severed this relationship through sin. However, God did not want to lose man. God wanted man to return and remain as His child. Then, as now, He “will have all men to be saved and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). God “is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pe 3:9).

But God did more than desire man’s salvation; He provided the way back to Himself. And each Person of the Trinity participated, so to speak. God the Father, out of His great love for the world, “gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn 3:16). God the Son, out of His love for sinners, “made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Php 2:7–8). God the Holy Ghost, out of the same love, makes the blessings of salvation our very own by bringing us to faith in Christ, and through such faith restores us to fellowship with God.

The salvation of sinners is an accomplished fact! Through the redemptive work of Christ the barrier of sin has been removed, atonement has been made, man is declared at one with God.

But while the salvation of sinners has been accomplished, the good news of that salvation must be proclaimed. It must be declared: 1) that *man might know* and 2) that *the Holy Spirit*, through the gospel as His effective instrument, *might work faith* in Christ *in men* and thus make them partakers of His salvation.

Precisely at this point comes our glorious privilege! Not even to angels but to His redeemed people has our Triune God entrusted the commission to proclaim this gospel of salvation to a world of sinners. It is to us, who believe in Him, that the Son of God has said, “Ye shall be witnesses unto Me...unto the uttermost part of the earth” (Ac 1:8). “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15). We have been called, as it were, into partnership with God! Our Triune God has done the *saving*; ours is the responsibility to *proclaim* this saving truth. In a very real sense, then, our privilege is to share with God the task of saving the world.—It is as awesome as it is glorious!

The obligations resting upon us, as partners with the Triune God, are expressed in numerous places in the sacred Scriptures—by Christ and by His inspired writers. But the directive most common and cherished by us is the one spoken by Jesus to His disciples after His resurrection and shortly before His ascension, popularly known as THE GREAT COMMISSION (Mt 28:18–20), which might be translated literally (at the expense of smoothness and familiarity): “Given to Me was all authority in heaven and on earth. Having gone, therefore, disciple all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to guard all things whatsoever I did bid you. And lo, I Myself am with you all the days until the consummation of the eon.”

Structurally, these words of our Savior encompass three distinct aspects which might be designated: the Great Claim, the Great Commission, and the Great Comfort. We shall follow this division.

The Great Claim

A commissioner requires credentials. Here our Commissioner presents His: “Given to Me was all authority in heaven and on earth.” As true God, He has *possessed* this power from all eternity; as true Man, He *received* this power—it has *been given* to Him. Even during the days of His humiliation, He exercised power

over sickness, hunger, demons, winds and waves, human hearts, even death. But now there is a difference. He has entered upon His exaltation. And now, according to His human nature, He is actually making full use of the divine attributes communicated to His human nature—actually exercising unlimited power over both heaven and earth, having it proclaimed everywhere without any restriction, and then at the end of the age raising *all* the dead, and judging *all* men. It is the investiture of the risen Christ with such unrestricted, universal sovereignty, that Jesus now claims and which, especially after His ascension to heaven, He is beginning to exercise. This is the reward upon His redeeming work (Eph 1:19–23; Php 2:9–10).

It staggers one's imagination: our Lord Jesus Christ has complete "authority in heaven"—over all the angels and archangels and all the saints in glory, over all principalities and powers and dominions and thrones. This authority extends over all the hosts of hell, for He has subdued them under His feet. This authority embraces all "on earth"—all the forces of nature, all living things, all nations under the sun, all human governments, all the rulers of men, all the armies and navies of the world, all nuclear power.

Why does Jesus make known this claim? To impress upon us *our* credentials! This same Jesus, the Ruler of heaven and earth, the King of creation, the Lord of the nations, has commissioned us! We are far from being helpless; the task is not impossible. We have the power and authority of Christ behind us; and no government on earth, no army, no human organization has had such resources to back it up! Who then can withstand us? Whom need we fear? As Christians we are carrying in our hearts the credentials, and on our lips the message, of the King of kings and the Lord of lords (Re 17:14). Our mission cannot fail. This is not to say that our efforts will always meet with success. They won't. But the success of our mission does not depend upon us. All our Commissioner asks of us is that we hold forth His Word of life to a dying world. It is still His Spirit who gives the increase. Nor will our credentials always be received; our message will often fall on deaf ears. Nevertheless our God has promised that His Word shall not return unto Him void, but it shall prosper in the thing whereto He has sent it (Is 55:11). The Great Claim is therefore a fitting introduction to:

The Great Commission

In the light of the foregoing, Jesus does not command, "Go!" The use of the participle, "having gone," assumes that such action is self-evident. It follows from His Great Claim as a natural consequence, because our Commissioner has promised to impart all the needed strength, and because He is worthy of the homage, faith, and obedience of all men.

The heart of the commission is in the one verb: "Disciple!" This brisk command has imperative force. It is an order! The mind, as well as the heart and the will, must be won for God. A disciple is *a pupil, a learner*. If men are to become disciples, the truth and will of God must be proclaimed to them. It is necessary that sinners *learn* about their own lost condition, about God, His plan of redemption, His love, His law, etc. This, however, is not enough. True *discipleship* implies much more. Mere mental understanding does not as yet make one a disciple. It is part of the picture, in fact an important part, but only a part. The truth learned must be practiced. It must be appropriated by heart, mind, and will, so that one *remains* and *abides* in the truth. Only then is one truly Christ's "disciple" (Jn 8:31).

The universality of the commission is made plain by "all the nations." Like a mighty army the church is to move, to advance, to invade. Our mission map has no boundaries; our divine Captain has set no limits on the conquests we are to make. What diversity exists among the nations! There are differences in race, color, nationality, language, culture, achievement; yet all have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Ro 3:23). All are thus separated from God, in need of a Savior; all have been redeemed by the same Savior; all are to be made His disciples.

The verb "disciple" does not indicate *how* disciples are to be made, it designates only an activity that will result in disciples. *The methods and ways* are indicated by the two participles: "baptizing" and "teaching." The order in which these two participles appear is not accidental. Jesus sees beyond the first missionary stage of the gospel work when adults must be taught before baptism can be administered to them; He sees His church being established among the nations and children thus entering it in infancy, and this by means of baptism.

“Baptize,” as all lexicographers agree, has a variety of meanings. It may mean to dip, immerse, wash, sprinkle, cleanse, in fact, refers to the application of water in any form. The word must be understood in the sense which it had at the time Jesus spoke, and the New Testament shows conclusively that “baptize” was used to designate every manner of applying water.

The “baptizing” of the Great Commission, however, is more than the application of water. In commissioning His church to baptize, our Lord Jesus stipulates that this be done in the name of the Triune God: “...in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

These words are not a mere pious recital. They are the Word of God which makes the water of baptism “a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost.” These words constitute the power of baptism, and they convey the blessings of baptism. Through baptism God becomes our Father; He adopts us as His children. Through baptism God the Son becomes our Redeemer and Brother; we become members of His body; we put on Christ; His righteousness becomes our glorious dress. Through baptism God the Holy Ghost becomes our Comforter, and we become His temple in which He deigns to dwell. Thus, through baptism, we enter into an intimate communion with God; we are received into fellowship with Him. He becomes our God and we become His people, the sheep of His pasture.

Thus baptism is not merely a symbolic washing as some would have it. It is a means of grace, a means of making disciples of people. It is a means of imparting the blessings of God’s grace to sinners. Luther correctly assures: “It works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to *all* who believe this.” And so we baptize “all the nations”—men and women, the old and the young, adults and infants. Jesus nowhere tells us that we must wait until a person reaches a certain age before we can baptize him. With His entreaty, “Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:14), our Commissioner clearly indicates that He wants the little children to be His disciples too. They are not the disciples of Jesus by nature. They are born in sin, under the wrath of God, separated from God; they, too, must be born again if they are to enter the kingdom of God. We can never sufficiently thank God that He has given us this wonderful means of grace whereby even infants can become His disciples—children of God and heirs of heaven!

Whereas baptism is one means of making disciples, “teaching them” (which includes public preaching) is another. And Jesus uses the specific word which means “teaching,” again a participle, parallel with “baptizing.” This teaching may either precede or follow baptizing, as the circumstances may require. The early church insisted that before the person to whom the gospel had been proclaimed be admitted to membership, he give evidence of genuine repentance and of knowledge of the basics of Christianity. G.W. Knight points out: “The early church was interested in edification as well as evangelism, in sanctification as well as conversion, in church government as well as preaching” (*The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Epistles*).

This teaching is not to be a mere intellectual process. Jesus says, “Teaching them to guard,” which means to obey and to preserve, and also to preserve and to keep inviolate. Required is a living reception in the heart, one that will henceforth control and mold the entire character and life. Then also this teaching will be so dear to the heart that no one will be allowed to take it away or in any way to alter it by false teaching.

What is it that we are to teach? “All things whatsoever I did bid you,” our Commissioner directs us. He binds us to all that He has bidden us in His Word—His marvelous discourses and parables, His precious sayings and assurances, His specific predictions and promises, His lessons on prayer, humility, trust, a forgiving spirit, yes, even the narrative of His sojourn on earth, the account of His healing, traveling, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension. We are to portray sin in all its heinousness; we are to declare the grace of God in all its sweetness. We are to preach the law to crush men’s stony hearts and the gospel to pick up the pieces and create new hearts in them. We are to teach the Word of God in its truth and purity, clearly enunciating each and every doctrine as it is set forth in the inspired Scripture. In short, we are to *teach all* that Christ has bidden us so that people may be led to guard all that He has bidden them. It is not accidental that He says elsewhere: “If ye continue [remain, abide] in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed” (Jn 8:31).

This is the purpose of our teaching: to lead people to repentance and faith; to bring people *to* Christ, to keep them *with* Christ, and to help them grow *in* Christ. It is to make them wise unto salvation, through faith

which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tm 3:15), true children of God who are thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tm 3:17). It is to give them the knowledge of God, the only true God, and of Jesus Christ, whom He has sent (Jn 17:3). This is life eternal. And this is the ultimate goal of the church's teaching mission, given by her commissioning Lord.

As our Lord began, so He now closes His Great Commission, offering still another word of encouragement. As we go about our task, we are not alone. With our task, He offers:

The Great Comfort

Our Commissioner has left with us the promise, "And lo, I Myself am with you all the days until the consummation of the eon." There is no vagueness about this assurance. It is more than a promise—it is *a fact!*

How emphatically He introduces it: "Lo!" "Take note," He means to say. "Pay close attention!" "Remember!" Jesus desires our eyes and hearts to be fixed on Him. The pronoun "I," usually included in the verb in Greek, is here also written as a separate word and is very emphatic, as if to say, "No one less than I Myself am with you!"—"With you" not just "forever" but "all the days," or "day in, day out."

To do the work of the Lord is often a lonely task. It is not easy for a missionary to leave home and country to go into a strange, distant land. But he does not go alone. Jesus is with him. It is not always easy for a young man, leaving the seminary, to begin his ministry in some out-of-the-way place which he has never heard of before. But he is not alone. The Lord Jesus is with him. It is not a simple matter to walk up to the door of a strange house, push the doorbell, look into an unfamiliar, forbidding countenance, and speak of Christ. But again, we are not alone. The Lord is by our side.

To do the work of the Lord is often a dangerous task. "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves" (Mt 10:16), cautions our Commissioner. But we are not alone. The Shepherd is with us to sustain us with the rod of His power and the staff of His authority. "And ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake" (Mk 13:13). But we are not alone. Jesus is with us to comfort us with His abiding love.

The work of the Lord is often discouraging. And in that work we often become sensible of our many weaknesses. But the Lord is ever present at our side. His grace is sufficient for us; for His strength is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor 12:9).

And so we go on. The world-age in which we live continues. It is one in which men go on in their earthly deeds from year to year. But this shall reach its completion, "until the consummation of the eon," when men shall no more live and act as they do now. The "eon" or age will have run its course and cease. This is the end of the world! But Jesus here makes a promise that extends far beyond the lifetime of all who were present before Him that day. It is as though He were speaking also to us. And He is! His words imply that His church on earth will continue to the end of time. And *during* all that time we possess His factual, comforting promise: "I Myself am with you all the days!"

Surely His Great Commission requires some grateful response! Let us be *praising* Him for having called us into fellowship with Him! Let us be *thanking* Him for the privilege of being His partners! Let us be *petitioning* Him that He will fill our hearts with zeal to do the work He has given us to do while it is day, before the night comes when no man can work!