

A Task Unfinished

16 Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.
17 When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some doubted.
18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.
19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*" Amen. (Matt. 28:16-20)

“In the vast plain to the north I have sometimes seen, in the morning sun, the smoke of a thousand villages where no missionary has ever been—Villages whose people are without Christ, without God, and without hope in the world.”– Robert Moffat, 1795-1883 Pioneer Missionary to South Africa

What Moffat saw when he looked at South Africa in the 19th century, is still the case in many parts of the world. As we listen to this on the tip of Africa, we are experiencing the fruits of those who obeyed the Great Commission of Matthew 28.

This account is sometimes confused with the ascension, but the ascension takes place after this at Bethany, on the Mount of Olives. This is a different event, one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances.

But it is a very important appearance. The angels who meet the women at the empty tomb tell them to go to Galilee. Jesus Himself sees the women and tells them to tell all the disciples to go to Galilee. Paul tells us that one of the resurrection appearances, 500 people saw Jesus simultaneously, and it is most likely that it was this appearance in Galilee. Jesus really wanted all His disciples in one place at one time to communicate this one special message.

The text doesn't tell us what mountain in Galilee Jesus met them on, but some think it was Mount Arbel, overlooking the Sea Galilee. It may have been the same mountain that Jesus spent all night praying upon, before He first called the twelve as apostles. Undoubtedly Jesus chose the place partly because of how it reminded them of their first call, and their first commission, to go and preach only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. And now there is a new commission.

It is here that Jesus gives what has been called the Great Commission. He gives them the particular marching orders for the church that will be established at Pentecost. These are the unique instructions for the church. There are many things which are common to God's people of both the old and New Testament. All of us must pursue the Great Commandment: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. All of us must worship, and obey, and walk humbly with our God. But Israel was not given the Great Commission. This Great Commission is a command given specifically to the church.

It's also a command that has a deadline. Jesus says here, “and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*” The end of this age concludes at the return of Christ, the Second Coming of Christ. That begins the final age, the age of the intermediate kingdom and then the eternal kingdom. But until that day, when Christ returns, this age is the church age, and Jesus promises to be with us, empowering us, comforting us, protecting us, exhorting us, enabling us, until the task is completed.

We tend to think we know the Great Commission, but there are some details in this account that we often miss, that the church at large has missed.

I. The Task of the Great Commission

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations,

Here is the main verb, the main action of the Great Commission. : go and make disciples. There are actually three words that modify and explain how you make disciples: going, baptising, and teaching. But this first one is probably best understood as simply essential to disciple-making. If you want to make a disciple, you have to go. You have find them, get to them, travel, reach out. Disciple-making is not passive, but active.

Also, notice that the command does not say, Go therefore and gain decisions from all the nations. For many years, evangelism was dominated by the word, "decisions for Christ", meaning people that claimed to hear the gospel, and then pray a prayer, sign a card, walk an aisle, raise their hand. Evangelists would took about an event where they secured 23 decisions for Christ. Now that's not all bad. The gospel does present human beings with their greatest decision: repent and trust Christ, or to reject and keep living for self. When you hear the gospel, you must use your will, and respond to God. We are not born Christians, nor do we grow into it. There comes a day when you must decide.

But notice, Jesus doesn't say, go and get decisions. He says, "Go and make disciples". The difference between a decision and a disciple, is that a decision may be the beginning of faith, but a disciple is faithful. A disciple has not simply made a decision for Christ, but is now faithfully learning, following, and obeying. A disciple, according to Luke 14, loves Christ more than family, takes up his cross to follow Christ, and is even willing to forsake his entire old life. This is not just a little decision. This is a grand exchange, a total swap of one life for another. Disciples have not just changed their minds, they've changed sides, they've changed roads, they changed destinations. So disciples don't just have faith, they are faithful.

We are not saved by faithfulness, we are saved by faith. But no one goes to Heaven without faithfulness, because true faith becomes faithful. True faith endures, perseveres, continues. "If you continue in my word, then you are my disciples indeed." Decisions that don't become disciples were never true decisions to begin with.

But now comes the part that many people miss.

Jesus says, Go and make disciples of all nations. The word here for nations is *ethne*, the ancestor of our English word ethnic or ethnicity. The phrase Jesus uses here comes up 18 times in the New Testament, and every time except once it means people groups. It does not mean simply Gentile individuals. It means tribes. It is used over 100 times in the Greek version of the Old Testament, and nearly always means people groups.

It does not mean nations in the sense that we think of nation-states, as in South Africa, Kenya, Bolivia, France, China. You have not fulfilled the Great Commission when you have made disciples within every nation represented at the United Nations. That's not what the Bible is referring to.

Jesus is referring to groups of people, united by a common language, place, ethnicity, culture and religion. A nation-state with one flag may actually have hundreds of nations in the biblical sense within its borders.

In 1974, Ralph Winter shocked missionaries at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation by

pointing out that even though every country had been penetrated with the gospel, four out of five non-believers still had not heard the gospel, because the barriers were not borders drawn on a map, but language, ethnicity. From that date, more and more Christians began recognising that the Great Commission is not a task to simply get into every country, and reach as many individuals as possible. The Great Commission is a task to reach and make disciples from every language and ethnic group on Earth.

The Joshua Project has calculated that there are, using their criteria, 16 543 people groups in the world. Of those 16 543, 6701 are unreached people, which means they do not have a gospel witness in their own language, with a functioning church that can make disciples among their people. Do you know that Coca-Cola was invented in 1886, and 134 years later, 94% of the people in the world recognize the Coca-Cola logo and product.? In 134 years, we can reach the world for profit's sake, but we cannot do it for the glory of God in 2,000 years.

Is this really what the Bible means by make disciples of all nations?

Well consider that God promised Abraham that all the nations of the earth would be blessed in him. Even though Israel was not charged to go to the nations, the psalms are full of declarations that God's glory should be declared among the nations, promises that one day the nations would worship the true God, and prayers that the nations would praise God. We see glimpses of what is to come in the book of Jonah. Jesus says the Temple was meant to be a house of prayer for all nations. We see Paul insisting in Romans 15 that he only preached where Christ had not been named, and that once he had seen a church begin among the people groups he said he had fulfilled his ministry. Paul actually says that only when the full number of the Gentiles has come in, that all Israel will be saved. And we then read in Revelation of every tribe, tongue and nation gathered before the throne.

Perhaps most significantly, Jesus said that only when every tribe, every ethnos has been witnessed to, will the end come. 14 "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. (Matt. 24:14)

What that tells us is that the Great Commission is not an endless task that can never be completed. It is a task to see disciples made of every people group in the world. So, how is the church doing on this task?

The good news is that there are more Christians tracking the amount of people groups in the world than ever before. In the first century, each church needed to reach 12 people groups. Now, there is 1 people group for each church, in fact, each church could share 1 people group with 1000 other churches.

The bad news is that Christians in the west spend 95% of offerings on home-based ministry, 4.5% on cross-cultural efforts in already reached people groups, and .5% to reach the unreached. 90% of foreign missionaries work among already reached people groups. 10% work among unreached people groups.

This is a task that can be finished, in our lifetimes, if we give ourselves to it. That leads us to the next point.

II. The Tool of the Great Commission

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

Who or what is to make disciples of all the nations? The answer is in the words, "baptising them" The only organisation given the authority to baptise is the church. The church is the tool. Not the

church as in worldwide Christianity. The church as in local, New Testament churches, the kind that baptise, celebrate the Lord's Supper, have pastors and deacons and worship and preach and disciple. The local church, in partnership with other local churches, is the tool for making disciples of all the nations. That's who baptises.

But what about Philip, who baptised that Ethiopian eunuch? That wasn't in church, so why can't we baptise whoever, whenever? Well, first, Philip is said in Acts 21:4 to be an evangelist, which means he is a church planter. Second, he receives special revelation so as to meet up with a man who will become the very first convert from the Ethiopian Jews, who is returning to his own people where there are no churches. So if you are an evangelist by calling, and your home church is under persecution, and you by divine appointment meet someone who is to become the first Christian among his people, then, yes, you can do just as Philip did.

But otherwise, it is churches that send church planters to the unreached people of the world. "At the moment when I put the bread and wine into those dark hands, once stained with the blood of cannibalism, but now stretched out to receive and partake the emblems of the Redeemer's love, I had a foretaste of the joy of Glory that well nigh broke my heart to pieces. I shall never taste a deeper bliss till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus Himself." – John G. Paton, 1824-1907, Pioneer Missionary to New Hebrides

Not printing ministries, evangelism ministries, radio ministries, apologetics ministries, aviation ministries or any other para-church ministry.

Now for the task of reaching the unreached, the local church will often need the assistance of para-church ministries: mission boards, mission aviations, Bible translation, printing presses and so on. And to the degree that these support and submit to the local churches, they are wonderful ministries. But when they act in their own name, and work outside the local church, they do not follow the biblical pattern. To the degree that they build what Christ is building, they do good work. But Jesus is very clear as to what He is building in Matthew 18: I will build my church.

In the book of Acts, Paul is not a free-floating evangelist, who acts on his own authority, preaches the gospel and sees decisions. No, Paul is firstly recognised and called to the work through the local church at Antioch. The church at Antioch sent the first missionaries, Paul and Barnabas. As they travel in Crete and Asia Minor, they plant other churches with pastors, deacons. And then they return to Antioch and report back to the churches that commissioned them. The Bible knows nothing about free-wheeling evangelists, accountable to no one except a faceless board of directors. The Bible has no record of people going around raising spiritual orphans, leaving them with nothing but a newsletter subscription and their prayers, while they report to their financial supporters how many converts they had.

No, churches sent their trained and equipped people. These trained and equipped people preach the gospel, and as God brings conversion, those disciples are brought into a church through baptism. Soon enough, those churches, like the one Paul planted in Philippi, begin supporting the work of missions to other places. The church at Philippi began supporting Paul as he continued his gospel witness.

Christ is building His church. The Great Commission is fulfilled by seeing not decisions, but disciples. Disciples are known through baptism and inclusion in a local church.

If the task is making disciples from all the people groups of the world, and the tool is the church that send its representatives to begin new churches, what is the technique?

III. The Technique of the Great Commission

"teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;

The method for making these disciples is going to be teaching. Imparting the truth to these nations, in their language, making sure they understand the concepts. And it is not just information. We know that because Jesus said we must teach them to observe all things I have commanded you. It is one thing to teach ideas; it is another to train people to practise the Christian life.

This means that we need to have people that will be among the unreached, impart the truth, and then live it out and model it so that those who accept Christ can begin imitating what they see.

Teach the truth, exemplify the truth. Train them. That means training the most promising of those believers into leaders, so that they can eventually have self-governing churches, self-supporting churches, and even self-propagating churches that will spread. You can again see why God wants this to be through the church. Churches that plant church-planting churches create an exponential evangelistic power. If it had been done that way all along, who knows where we might be already.

Now that sound simple. But in fact, it requires massive amounts of resources, and massive amounts of time. It takes many years to learn a foreign language. It takes lots of money to support people while they learn the language, and learn the culture. From a results point of view, it doesn't look good. If you think the Great Commission is go and get the maximum number of people to make a decision, then reaching the unreached will not be interesting to you. But apparently, God wants the church invest in the slow, painstaking work of either getting our people into other nations, or training nationals when they come to our countries, to return to their nations.

Now there are many other things that people like to do, which are not contained in this verse. They look very good on the outside, they seem very impressive and humanitarian. So you have churches that send teams and money to dig wells for people. You have churches that come with food packages. You have churches that come and teach people how to farm and get better use of their land. You have adult literacy programs, teaching people to read, or to gain a skill. You have medical missions, with doctors coming in to do eye surgery, fight malaria.

But all of these things, as great as they are, by themselves are not teaching people. By themselves, they become just a social gospel, a hopeless message of helping and healing the body with no good news for the soul. But they are very attractive to a culture that now hates the word missionary, and despises the idea of trying to convert people. It is never offensive to bring food, shelter, medicine, water, and money. But it is always offensive to tell people that their gods are demons, that Yeshua, the Messiah of Israel is the hope for all men everywhere, that our biggest problem is sin, and that God both loves you and hates your sin. So some churches do nothing but social missions, forgetting that Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you, but me you will not always have", or that He said, "Let the dead bury their dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God (Lk. 9:60)" Unbelievers can do social work just as well or better than believers, but only believers can teach people the gospel.

Now wherever the gospel has taken root, what has sprung up with it has been schools, and literacy, and hospitals, and orphanages, and better sanitation and better farming, increased wealth. The gospel does affect the whole human being. But because of our tendency to shy away from the offence of the cross, we need to remind ourselves that the primary technique of the great

commission is teaching the gospel. Teaching God's Word. Teaching the Bible.

We will make disciples of the nations when go, teach, and baptise those who believe into churches, where we continue to teach them till they come to maturity. This can take many, many years, usually decades.

To fulfill this Great Commission, there are those who go, and those who send. Those who go take on the task of learning the language, learning the culture, living in a foreign place for many years, facing the risks and the dangers and embracing the privilege and responsibility of being the first contact that this people group has with the gospel.

Those who send make sure they understand the task. They pray intelligently. They give generously. They support emotionally. They encourage regularly.

There was a time when young people seemed to be volunteering for the mission field in droves. Today, we are seeing more missionaries retiring than those who are replacing them. Many young people are only interested in a wealthy career, and they probably got that worldliness from their parents.

There were two boys in the Taylor family. The older said he must make a name for himself, so he turned his face towards parliament and fame. The younger son decided to give his life in service to Christ, so he turned his face towards China as a missionary. That younger son, J. Hudson Taylor, eventually died, known and beloved on every continent as the missionary to the Chinese. "But when I looked in the encyclopaedia to see what the other son had done," one person said, "I found only these words: the brother of Hudson Taylor."

He who saves his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for Christ's sake will find it.