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CHAPTER VII

TEACHING THE GREAT COMMISSION

Hans Kasdorf

Section VII of the Mennonite Brethren *Confession of Faith* reads: "We believe that the command to make disciples of all nations is the primary task of the church."¹ What a rare statement of faith that is! Rare, I say, because confessions and creeds of the church are not known for their focus on the Great Commission.² They teach about everything else considered worthy for the preservation of the faith once "delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)³ but, paradoxically, rarely include the need for the proclamation of the gospel which brings about that very faith they confess.

That highlights a grave error in the history of the church, namely the error of deleting the "c" from "commission" which in essence is *omission* of the commission. Yet we must be quick to concede that omitting the Great Commission from doctrinal creeds does not necessarily mean that it is also omitted from the church's deeds. Nor does the inclusion of a statement on the commission in a confession guarantee that it is carried out in practice. But there is merit when a community of believing men and women says, "We believe in the Lord's mandate to make disciples of all nations," and underscores: "every member has the responsibility to be a witness to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and to call men [and women] to be reconciled to God."⁴ There is also psychological value in reciting the Great Commission in an article of faith. The more frequently such an article is repeated, the greater is the impression it makes on the repeater.

The Great Commission refers to the missionary mandate which the risen Lord gave to His followers prior to His

ascension (Mt. 28:19). In it Jesus declared unequivocally the divine intent that all people should be made his disciples. The authenticity and trustworthiness of the Great Commission passages have been adequately defended by evangelical scholarship and are here accepted as a given.

In order to see the Great Commission in its broader context we will look at the scriptural content, offer some exegetical comments, point out its universal components, and conclude with practical considerations.

I. SCRIPTURAL CONTENT

Although the best known expression of this commission is given by Matthew, other evangelists express the same idea, only in different forms. This provides the church with a broad foundation on which to base its missionary outreach. My main focus will be on the Matthean text, particularly under "Exegetical Comments." But I will draw supplementary insights from the accounts given by other Synoptic writers, the Gospel of John, and Acts.

A. The Matthean Text

The words of the Great Commission are given in the final paragraph of Matthew, beginning at verse 16. For the purpose of getting the full impact of the text I have chosen to quote it in two translations:

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

17 And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted. 18 And 18 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

16 Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them.

17 And when they saw Him they worshiped [Him]; but some doubted. 18 And when Jesus had come close, he said to them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."

19 Therefore, having gone forth, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you all the days until the consummation of the age"

(D. Ewert).⁵

The text is no afterthought of our Lord; "it is no mere appendage loosely attached to the end of the first gospel, but an integral part of its entire message."⁶ The entire message of the gospel is, in turn, an integral part of the whole Bible. This is important to note, lest we sever one small segment from the whole corpus of biblical revelation. Not only the Great Commission passages but the entire biblical message "is inspired by God and profitable for teaching" (2 Tim. 3:16).

"Mission was formerly based a little too one-sidedly and (even) almost exclusively on this 'great commission'," observes a Dutch theologian and mission teacher, with reference to Jesus' pronouncement recorded by Matthew. "But," he continues, "the fault lay not in the fact that mission was based on *this* declaration, but in fact that Matthew 28:18-20 was isolated from the whole of the Biblical witness."⁷ We must guard against a one-sided approach in both teaching and fulfilling the Great Commission.

B. Mark's Record

Mark's account of the Great Commission is found in the so-called "Longer Ending" of the resurrection story.⁸ The setting was in a house. The eleven disciples were around the table eating a meal. Jesus rebuked them because they refused to believe that He had risen from the dead. Mark records the Great Commission from the conversation between Jesus and his disciples.

The unique features of this record are: (a) The Master's mandate to "preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:16 NIV) or "all created ones" (Schlatter); (b) the assurance of salvation to everyone "who believes"; (c) the pronouncement of condemnation upon those who respond in disbelief; and (d) the promise that various "signs will accompany those who believe" (16:17-18). Professor D. Edmond Hiebert of the Biblical Seminary in Fresno comments:

These signs were the authenticating credentials of the apostolic message exhibiting the presence of the living Christ working with and through His messengers. They served not to accredit the faith of the individual but the validity of the faith he represented.⁹

Hiebert believes that the infant and young church needed these signs and that the adult and mature church will not be without them.

C. Luke's Account

The central focus of the Lucan record of the Great Commission is on *witness*. Not only does Jesus explicitly declare the disciples to be *witnesses* (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8), but the setting in which he gave the Great Commission clearly demonstrates that fact.

First of all, they were *witnesses* with the respect to the past. In a post-resurrection encounter with two disciples on the road to Emmaus Jesus presented himself as the Master Teacher. He expounded to them the entire collection of Old Testament predictions concerning himself, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets. . .and the psalms" (24:27, 44). It is likely, as the Dutch missiologist Johannes Bavinck suggests, that Jesus began with Genesis 1:1, declaring unequivocally God as the Creator of heaven and earth.¹⁰ The meaning is: God has created everything, and everything is within the sphere of his interest.¹¹ Luke adds that their hearts burned "while he opened [to them] the scriptures" (24:32).

These scriptures stood on their side as the undefeated historical witness and were to become the very content of

their preaching "in his name to all nations" (24:47). When the two disciples came to Jerusalem they became *witnesses* to other disciples of "what had happened on the road" (24:35).

Secondly, they were *witnesses* with respect to the present. In addition to the witness of Scripture touching Christ's resurrection, Luke records two instances which helped to convince the disciples that Christ was alive, indeed. One had to do with the Lord's actual physical body: "See my hands and my feet that it is I myself" (24:39). The other had to do with what was later to become a vital sign of the church, His spiritual body. As he ate, they recognized Him. As the church breaks bread, it acknowledges Him as Savior and Lord "until He comes."

Thirdly, they were *witnesses* with respect to the future. The Great Commission is solidly rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. But there is also a future dimension to be noted. When Jesus declared it, he actually pronounced a task of macrocosmic proportions in the whole context of salvation history, namely "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem." Then he declared to the disciples: "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:47-48). In Acts 1:1-8 Luke elaborates on the commission, turning from the historical record to eschatological promise and fulfillment; (a) "You shall receive power"; and (b) "You shall be my witnesses." The coming of the Holy Spirit to take possession of Jesus' followers will always result in *being* witnesses for him.

D. The Fourth Gospel

John's record of the Great Commission (John 20:19-23) adds another dimension, namely the centrality of Christ's *sentness* by the Father and Jesus' act of *sending* the church. Whereas Luke's focus is on the *witness* as he reflects on the past and underscores the continuity of salvation history from the Old Testament to Christ and the church, John begins with the *sentness* of Christ and projects the continuity of that *sentness* in the future mission of the church.

The *sentness* of Jesus has great implications for the

sending of the church, as the missionary statesman and Bible teacher, John R. Stott, points out. The key phrase is "I send you."

First, the personal pronoun "I" represents the emphatic form of the Greek word "ego" and "expresses the authority of the sender."¹²

Second, the verb "send" represents the action of the Son's sending by the Father and the church's sending by the Son. The only difference is that the Son was sent on His own merit, whereas the church is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit. But it is this word "send" which expresses the heart of the Great Commission in John's gospel.

Third, the final word "you" refers in the first place to the apostles who were present when Jesus spoke. However, it is not restricted to them as Luke's account indicates (Luke 24:33). As Jesus was *sent by the Father*, so *He sends* the whole church for the Father into the world. The church in turn is *sent to send*.

In his commentary on John, B.F. Westcott (1825-1901) differentiates between the apostle's use of the tenses in "has sent" and "I send." The mission for which Christ was sent by the Father had not yet reached the point of historical fulfillment. The effects of his acts were still to be continued. "The apostles were commissioned to carry on Christ's work, and not to begin a new one."¹³ This agrees with Luke's commentary to Theophilus in Acts 1:1 where he writes that he has "dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach." The implication is that the disciples or the church are to carry out the work Christ began. The dimension of *sentness* in the Great Commission is to be understood as an ongoing process between the resurrection and return of Jesus Christ.

E. Paul's Reiteration

When the Lord years later revealed Himself to Paul, the special apostle or missionary to the Gentiles, He reiterated another form of the Great Commission in a singular manner saying,

I send you [to the Gentiles] to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of

Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:17-18).

We know that Paul was not present at any of the occasions when Jesus gave the Great Commission to His pre-Pentecostal followers. Nonetheless, he stands in a long line of eyewitnesses who saw the risen Lord. In fact, when we read his account of Christ's post-resurrection appearances (I Cor. 15:1-8), it seems as though he were paraphrasing the Lucan record of the Great Commission (Luke 24:44f.). Jesus, however, considered the Great Commission of such primary importance that he gave a special version of it to Paul himself (Acts 26:17) or to Ananias especially for Paul (Acts 9:15-16), or both.

The tragic fact of which G.W. Peters speaks when he says "that the Great Commission has been more debated than it has been obeyed in church history,"¹⁴ does not apply to Paul. He had a distinct awareness that "all nations" must hear the gospel (Romans 1:5). He obeyed the Lord's commissions as the Lord himself had obeyed the Father's commission—"even unto death."

II. EXEGETICAL COMMENTS

I want to underscore again that the Great Commission has a broad base: The entire Old Testament and all the teachings and precepts of Jesus up to the time when it was given. If the world mission of the church were to rest only on the isolated texts in which the words of the commission appear the whole missionary enterprise could be likened to a gigantic "pyramid built upside down" and would not stand the tests of time. Former Colombia missionary David Howard reminds us that we must realize this fact. He maintains "that the missionary mandate of the church is actually a pyramid built right side up with its base running from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22." Thus the "scope of biblical teaching" on world mission, says Howard, encompasses the entire complex of redemption history.¹⁵

A. The Historical Setting

It is imperative to our understanding of the Great Commission that the gospel account relates a real event in time and space (Mr. 28:16-20).

1. The time is to be noted. "Now [or then] the eleven disciples went to Galilee" (v. 16a). This simply indicates continuation of the post-resurrection narrative.

From both Luke and John we learn that the Lord gave the Great Commission on the day of his resurrection when he for the first time met with the disciples in a house in Jerusalem (Luke 24:1f., 13f., 33f.; John 21:19f.). But Matthew obviously reports a different occasion. The meeting had been preplanned by the Lord himself (Mt. 28:10). The risen Christ had made an appointment with his followers to meet at an appointed time and to reveal himself and God to them. But this moment of time between resurrection and ascension has wider implications. "This revelation of Jesus' presence, placing the faithful in the center of time," says one commentator, "disclosed to them the past and future work of God."

2. The place is also important in the setting. The text says that the "disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them" (Mt 28:16). To make sure that they would be informed of his intent to meet them at his favorite spot he left very clear instructions, once with the angel by the empty tomb and once with the women who had seen him alive. The angel commanded the women, "Go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead. . . he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mt. 28:7). On the way to the disciples the women met Jesus personally. He greeted them, "Hail!" and said, "go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee and there they will see me" (Mt. 28:9-10).

The greatest teachings of Jesus as recorded by Matthew had been given either by the sea side or on a mountain. Jesus loved the rendezvous with his followers on the mountain top and thus he chose to give the final instructions to his disciples in Galilee where he gave them the first. In his exposition of the Matthean text the Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) makes a pertinent observation.

Significantly, Matthew leads Jesus' history back to the place of its origin (Mt. 4:12-17); to the Galilee of the Gentiles, to the people who walked in darkness and have seen a great light. The history of the end stands in continuity with the previous events in the life of Jesus and the history of Israel which in turn point to the end.¹⁷

The mountain on which our Lord gave the Great Commission as recorded by Matthew may have been the one on which he gave the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5-7), or the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17), or as the British commentator Tasker suggests,¹⁸ the mountain where Jesus had originally commissioned the Twelve and given them the restrictive instructions to go only "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 10:6). But the exact geographical identification of the mountain is less important than the event that took place there. "It is as if Jesus were saying," contends Howard, "As I began my ministry to preach repentance here in Galilee, I am now commanding you to go from here to all nations with the message with which I am entrusting you."¹⁹

3. The final thing to note is the encounter between Jesus and his disciples. Matthew states that the eleven disciples had gone to Galilee. But it is very likely that the women who had met him in Jerusalem (28:8-10) were also there. It is also conceivable that the "five hundred brethren" of whom Paul speaks (I Cor. 15:6) may have been present at this meeting.²⁰

Many things must have begun to make sense to his followers. No doubt, they recalled that memorable meeting on Mount Olive between the Last Supper and the crucifixion when Jesus had said to them, "It is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (Mt. 26:31-32). It is evident, then, that that post-resurrection meeting in Galilee was to be an important event to both the Lord and his disciples.

"And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted" (28:17). The encounter in Galilee is highlighted by two reactions standing in opposition to each other. The first reaction is worship. The women had already worshiped him in Jerusalem on the day Christ had risen

(28:9). Now in Galilee the circle of worshipers had increased and it will increase still more when they will worship him at his ascension (Luke 24:51) and even more when he will return and "every knee. . . in heaven and on earth and under the earth" shall bow "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10-11).

There is no recorded incident that the disciples worshiped Jesus prior to his resurrection. But now they recognize in him the *kyrios*, the LORD. "Worship is offered in the presence of the revealed God", says Barth. "Jesus encountered them as God, and they encounter him now as worshippers."²¹

The second reaction in the encounter is doubt. There were some in the group who doubted. The word used for doubt (*distazo*) is not so much an expression of unfaith or disbelief; it implies much more a sense of confusion or perplexity.²²

How often had Jesus gathered his disciples around himself during the three years of teaching and preparation for his final meeting. But this meeting is different from all the others. He is no longer the one who will go to Jerusalem in order to suffer and die and to rise again. He is now the one who has been in Jerusalem, who has suffered and died "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The things Moses and the prophets and the poets had written about him had been fulfilled, indeed! (Luke 24:44).

B. The Actual Components

One way to gain a clear perspective of the Commission itself is to itemize the major components.²³

1. *The Lord's Claim of Authority.* "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (v. 19). This claim of authority is both *exclusive* and *inclusive*. It is *exclusive* in that there is no one else to whom this *exousia* or power has been entrusted; it is *inclusive* in that there is neither any celestial nor terrestrial sphere that is not encompassed by the omnipotence of the Lord Christ.

Christ's pronouncement of authority presupposes the event of the ascension or enthronement, though chronologically this event had not yet taken place. This

thought is best understood in the context of the prophet's prediction in Daniel 7:13-14 and the apostle's announcement in Philippians 2:9-11, as Otto Michel of Tübingen has pointed out.²⁴ What Daniel 7:13-14 predicted, Matthew 28:18 regards as fulfilled. Michel paraphrases and quotes: "The Son of Man came on the clouds of heaven, was presented before the Ancient of Days, and given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." It is well to bear in mind that the scene described here reflects a common ceremony of enthronement of a King, comprising at least three events:²⁵ (a) that of exaltation or introduction of the person; (b) that of presentation or declaration; and (c) that of the enthronement proper or transfer of power. Jesus claims all this. The phrase, "has been given" indicates timelessness.²⁶ He holds authority forever!

Truly, Jesus is Lord! The kingdom is his, and he is its King. Indeed, "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:9). "The immeasurable greatness" of God's power has been given to Christ when he was raised from the dead and exalted "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:19-21). Christ's claim of authority made on the mountain in Galilee is affirmed by "loud voices in heaven": "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

2. *The Lord's Charge to Make Disciples.* "Therefore, having gone forth, *make disciples of all nations*" (28:19 Ewert, italics/mine). Gustav Warneck (1834-1910), German missionary statesman, called this commission the *Magna Charta of our Lord*.²⁷

We should note several things in connection with this commission. The first is the word "therefore." The mandate to make disciples of all peoples presupposes the claim to cosmic power on the part of Jesus, the absolute authority. Behind the commission of verse 19 stands the Commissioner of verse 18. He assures the execution of the command over against both the disciples' weakness and any in-

terference by a third party."²⁸ Christ's authority on earth had already been great, but now it is boundless!

We do well to remember that our resources in Christian witness are not within ourselves, but in Christ's unlimited resourcefulness. He has the authority to give the Holy Spirit to empower the powerless. And even though the historical event of Pentecost was still to come, there was already power and passion on this Galilean mountain.

Surely, the disciples must have been reminded of another mountain scene where Christ in a prayer "uttered the Manifesto of His Kingdom," as G. Campbell Morgan, that prince among Bible expositors, has put it.²⁹ Two things must have become clear to them: (a) that it always was God's will for heaven and earth to give Christ absolute power over these spheres; and (b) that the disciples themselves in the dynamic of that power were to make all peoples what they themselves were—disciples.

The second thing to be noted is the command itself: "Make disciples!" It is imperative in form and meaning—the only imperative verbal form in the entire paragraph beginning with verse 16.³⁰ In fact the words "make disciples" (*matheteusate*) is the only grammatical imperative in any of the Great Commission accounts given by the evangelists. The frequently stressed phrase "go ye," as the Authorized Version renders it, is not an imperative, but rather a participial form meaning to "pass from one place to another." It is thus better translated by "having gone" or "as you go" make disciples. The Lord of heaven and earth has so much confidence in his followers that he takes their *going* for granted but not the weightier matter of making disciples. The latter basic command presupposes the former fact that Christians have already gone and are already on the scene of discipling activity. That means that unless we go to the undisciplined we will never disciple them. But it does not mean that we will always make disciples even *if we go*. Thus Christ underscores *disciplemaking*, not *going*. "In a thousand missionary sermons," says Robert D. Culver of Dallas Theological Seminary, this common interpretation of *going* and what has gone into it "is both naive and, in part, erroneous."³¹ All too often this emphasis has geograph-

ically focused on "foreign missions" rather than biblically on "world mission"; it has glamorized the foreign and distant at the expense of disciplinemaking *wherever* disciples live a life of discipleship among the nondisciplined.

Nonetheless, the whole matter of *going* is of utmost importance. The Christian religion is not centripetal, based on a "come-structure"; it is centrifugal, based on a "go-structure." The imperative "make disciples" presupposes the aorist participle "having gone."

Thirdly, we note the object of the mandate: "all the nations" or peoples (*panta ta ethne*). This speaks of the universal scope of the charge. But it is more than that. Ever since Warneck, the founder of evangelical science of mission, many people involved in the task of disciplinemaking have taken Christ's commission rather literally. Like Warneck himself, they interpret these words "all peoples" to mean an entire people such as a tribe, a clan, a family or a homogeneous unit in society rather than isolated individuals. They recognize that in many cultures people make communal rather than individual decisions. A Western mind trained in and conditioned by a philosophy of individualism finds it hard to comprehend that people can convert in groups. That does not mean that there is no personal decision; but it is often multipersonal, not individualistic. There is a wealth of older as well as current missionary literature to illustrate my point.³² The Holy Spirit moves where he wills. He often convicts and converts every responsible member in a given culture and through these converts brings a whole people to Christ. These first generation Christians, then, become responsible for discipling subsequent generations.

Such is the object of Christ's charge. Not only isolated "Korneliusseelen" (Cornelius souls) must be saved, but entire peoples must become *disciples*. A disciple not only counts the privilege of being "saved", he pays the price for following Christ in life.

Fourthly, Jesus also says something about method and means of disciplinemaking. The two words he uses to describe the process are *baptizing* and *teaching*. Each of these present participles is modified—the one by the prepositional phrase, "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the

Holy Spirit"; the other by an infinitive clause, "to observe all that I have commanded you" (28:19). Baptism speaks of an new relationship—the relationship to the omnipotent Lord; teaching speaks of a new ethic—the ethic of the kingdom of the omnipotent King.³³

From the context of the other Great Commission passages, already referred to, it becomes clear that the matter of repentance (Lk. 24:47), forgiveness of sins (Lk. 24:47; John 20:23), and faith or trust (Mark 16:16) is of prime importance in disciplinmaking. Matthew (28:19) and Mark (16:16) point out that baptism is likewise very important in the process. In Jesus' day baptism certified the renouncement of the old and acceptance of a new state or position. Baptizing someone in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit means that his loyalty now belongs to this Triune God.³⁴ Added to this, says the late Swiss commentator, Fritz Rienecker, are several new aspects that give baptism its real meaning. One is that Jesus himself entered baptism (Mt. 3:13f.). Furthermore, his death and resurrection provided new content for baptism. Thus water baptism of believers signifies dying with Christ and rising with him to a new life (Rom. 6:1ff.).³⁵

This brings us to the next point, namely that of teaching. The process of making disciples demands ongoing instruction, a theology of Christian nature, a setting in which the new converts are not only fed information, but have the chance for observation. What counts, says Jesus, is that they are being taught "to observe all that I have commanded you" (28:20). This is a broad curriculum when we think of *all* that Jesus taught by word and deed. He lived what he taught. In a nutshell, what Jesus commanded his disciples was to *be* his followers (Lk. 9:23f.; Mt. 10:38f.). As Jesus modeled what he taught, so the disciples must model as they disciple others. But they cannot model themselves; they must model Christ. The life pattern of a disciple must be determined by the life of Jesus Christ. All too often, "even in mission work," says Richard De Ridder of Calvin Seminary, "we try to make others like ourselves! How easy it is to pattern an emerging church after a church in a foreign society."³⁶ As we make disciples it is crucial that we teach what Jesus commanded and lived.

C. The Eschatological Promise

When Jesus was about to step onto the platform of this *kosmos* as the Savior of the world, he was introduced by God's angel as the "*Emmanuel*, which means, God with us" (Mt. 1:23). Now when he is about to step off the cosmic platform, he himself promises that divine presence to continue with those who make known that Jesus redeems: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28:20). This is the real "support system of world mission" as Elmer Martens, president of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary recently said.

It is not difficult to trace the echo of the promise of God's presence with his people throughout salvation history. "I am with you," the Lord said to Jacob (Genesis 28:15), to Moses (Exodus 3:12), to Israel (Is. 42:6), and to the prophet (Jer. 1:18). The Old Testament people of God knew God as *Yahweh* or Lord. "That," he said, "is my name" (Is. 42:8). The New Testament people of God know him as *Kyrios* or Lord of power in heaven and earth.

The end times are the times of world mission which last from the Lord's resurrection until his return. These eschatological times have begun, but they are not yet consummated. "I am with you always" is the promise of presence following the command to make disciples of all nations. "The presence of Christ is *the* great gift to His disciples," says Blauw. As *Yahweh* expressed his presence to Israel, his servant, so Jesus promises his presence to the church, his servant among all peoples.³⁷

Perhaps nothing has been more encouraging to the followers of Jesus throughout history as his personal presence with them in world mission. Prior to his crucifixion Jesus said to his disciples, "I am going to him who sent me" (John 16:5). But "I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever" (Jn. 14:16).

After his death and resurrection Jesus reassured the disciples of his abiding presence in the person of the Holy Spirit (Lk. 24:49; Acts 1:8). John (21:22) records that Jesus actually "breathed on them," saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Upon his exaltation to "the right hand of God," Jesus

himself "received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:33) and gave him as a guiding and abiding presence and as a dynamic power to make disciples of all peoples until his return in glory.

III. UNIVERSAL COMPONENTS

I have already referred to the universal scope of the Great Commission. But there are at least four explicit components of such comprehensive proportion that they merit separate treatment. The word *all* is used in *all* authority, *all* peoples, *all* things, and *all* days.

As stated earlier, Christ's claim of power is both exclusive and inclusive. The personal pronoun "me" clearly indicates that Jesus draws attention to himself as the bearer of "all authority in heaven and on earth." That is the gift from his Father. "In this whole world," says Bluaw—be that visible or invisible, be that evil principalities of heavenly domains or worldly powers of earthly dominions—"has been wrested from the grip of any other powers whatsoever."³⁸

Worldly rulers throughout history have grabbed for power to subdue and oppress, to exploit and possess, to subject and distress. But their source of power is in the god of this world, called "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 2:2). In world mission these powers are a reality both in the spirit world and in the world of human despots.

In the midst of all this the missionary as every follower of Christ hears him declare: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*"

A. The Universality of Christ's Purpose

"The fundamental basis of all Christian missionary enterprise," John Stott reminds us again, "is the universal authority of Jesus Christ." From this power emanates the purpose: "Make disciples of *all* nations."³⁹ This is an unprecedented commission. The Master had given many mandates prior to this universal charge. But they were all

narrow in scope. There is, for instance, the ethnic commission to go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," preaching "the kingdom of God" (Mt. 10:5-7); there is the pastoral commission to feed the Lord's sheep (Jn. 21:16); there is the sociological commission to love one's neighbor as oneself (Mt. 22:39); then there is the theological commission to "love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt. 22:37). But none of these mandates has that universal dimension as the Great Commission.

The Great Commission is a great turning point in salvation history. Hitherto the focus had been more on the "lost sheep of Israel"; henceforth it is as much on the lost peoples from the "Gentile lands," as Karl Barth puts it.⁴⁰ This does not exclude Israel, but it includes all peoples. Our globe today hosts 223 independent nation states⁴¹ and an estimated 4.2 billion people who are divided into 16,750 sub-cultures and speak more than 5,000 mutually unintelligible languages.⁴²

The marching order is upon the church to make all peoples disciples of Jesus by proclaiming that God's Son became incarnate man in this world, that he suffered, died, and rose that *all* might have forgiveness of sins and be reconciled to God.

In order to make disciples of all nations, of all peoples, of all ethnic groups, of all tribes, and of all geographic frontiers, ethnic borders and linguistic barriers as well as social and cultural divisions, the church must continue *going forth* and, *having gone*, make disciples. Blauw is right: "The making of disciples can happen only in a movement of the disciples of Christ towards all nations."

B. The Universality of Christ's Precepts

Jesus specifies in the Great Commission that teaching young converts *all* he has commanded is an integral part of disciplinmaking. Disciples are made, not born, faith and life must be patterned after his precepts. Even children biologically born to Christian parents must be spiritually reborn and then nurtured by teaching them *all* things *Jesus* commanded. Both the person who commanded, and *all* that he

commanded are important. Blauw's observation is so pertinent that it deserves to be quoted at length:

The *total* dominion over the *total* world of men must also come to expression in a *total* dedication and submission to what Jesus had commanded. That is not to say that life is to be submitted to a new impersonal *law* or legalism; it seems of great significance to me that there is no reference her to the "commandments of Jesus", but of "what I have commanded". The obedience is determined by the relation to Jesus Christ Himself, not by a conformity to an impersonal commandment.⁴³

The command to teach *all* things is universally binding on both the discipler and the disciplined. The one must obey the Lord and simply carry out his task and teach by word and deed; the other must obey and observe in daily living the things taught. This goes beyond mere indoctrination; it means new life formation. What must be clear beyond the shadow of a doubt, says Warneck, is "that Christianity does not merely bring a new teaching which is to be believed, but a new life which is to be lived."⁴⁴

The church, of course, must provide the context for teaching *all* things Christ commanded, as Elmer Martens observes. "When Paul established churches," says Martens, "he appointed elders whose work it was to take what they had 'heard. . . in the presence of many witnesses, entrust it to faithful men who would be able to teach others also' (II Tim. 2:2)."⁴⁵ This involves ongoing teaching and training, not in isolation, but in community and fellowship with believers. G.W. Peters is right in saying that "Christian disciples are not produced in moments of time, in isolation or in a doctrinal vacuum. Time, fellowship and teaching are not only important; they are essential."⁴⁶ "Teaching *all* things" is an ongoing process in discipling until Jesus returns.

C. The Universality of Christ's Presence

In his classical hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," Martin Luther (1483-1546) made this humble confession:

When we on our own strength rely
We struggle, but are losing.

Then he adds:

But win when He is on our side,
The Man of God's own choosing.

The disciplemaker has the assurance that the "man of God's own choosing" is on his side *all* the days. That gave Paul, the great discipler, the boldness to write from a jail cell in Rome, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). The Christ of *all* authority and omnipotence is the Christ of omnipresence *all* the days of the mission era.

IV. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The question as to whether the Great Commission can be taught is difficult to answer. Yet there are several considerations based on a biblical injunction, on historical experience and on psychological implications that should motivate us to action in teaching that the Great Commission is binding for all times.

A. Light From the Bible

In the Old Testament God commanded his people, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:6), to which Christ adds, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39). It is very explicit that the "Great Commandment" (Mt 22:36) should be taught diligently to each generation. By analogy, the same injunction can be applied to the words of the Great Commission:

You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall talk of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise (Deut. 6:7).

The value of the Great Commission lies in the very fact that the risen Lord expressed it in several forms before leaving this earth and that the Holy Spirit saw fit to record it in each of the Gospels and in Acts. This not only "witnesses to

its tradition in the early church," but it also "demonstrates its dynamic in the original movement of Christianity."⁴⁷

B. Lessons from History

The history of world mission provides us with the most enlightening record on the response of the church to the Great Commission. Whenever the church has responded in obedience both its life at home and its witness in the world showed dynamic signs of vitality and spirituality on the road of its pilgrimage. But the opposite is also true. A few examples must suffice to illustrate my point.

First, the apostolic church lived by the Great Commission. It may be argued, as Harry Boer shows,⁴⁸ that it was the dynamic of the Holy Spirit and not obedience to the Great Commission that motivated the early church to engage in world mission.

Whatever the motivating force may have been, three factors remain to be underscored.⁴⁹ One is the account each gospel writer gives of the Great Commission. This stands as a monumental witness to its dynamic tradition in the primitive church. The second factor is the presence of a dynamic missionary movement in the early church. This demonstrates the realization of the Great Commission at that time. The third thing is Paul's consciousness of having been sent to the Gentile nations for the purpose of bringing the Gospel to them. His method of disciplinmaking by preaching Christ crucified and risen, by baptizing or having baptized those who believe, and by teaching or disciplining those baptized is clearly patterned after the Great Commission.

Second, the postapostolic church has "spelled out" the Great Commission under various circumstances, as the late Max Warren (1904-1978), director of the Church Mission Society, has put it. Warren makes reference to a pamphlet by Samuel Zwemer (1867-1952), "the apostle to Islam," on *The Patience of God in Moslem Evangelisation*. This pamphlet, Warren says, is one of his "more treasured possessions" because it helps him understand the response of the church to the Great Commission throughout history.

The patience of God—that surely is the only starting point for any theological understanding of the bitter-sweet story of how the Church in history has spelled-out and mis-spelled its great commission.⁵⁰

Yes, the church has, indeed, mis-spelled the Great Commission by omitting the first letter in the second word which spells “omission.” True, there has always been *Light in Dark Ages*, as Raymond Edman (1900-1967), former president of Wheaton College, has conclusively demonstrated. But some carried that light in the form of a barely glowing candle. Nonetheless, the Great Commission has always been taken seriously—if not by the church, then by individuals within the church in postapostolic and prereformation times.

Third, there was a renewed, dynamic interest in the Great Commission within the so-called “Radical Reformation” movement in the sixteenth century. With their emphasis on the Believers’ Church these Anabaptist or biblically radical Christians were simply gripped by the force of the Great Commission accounts found in the gospels. Franklin H. Littell, the Methodist scholar of the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement quotes the Great Commission passages from an early Luther Bible and then comments:

No texts appear more frequently than the above in the confessions of faith and in court testimonies of the Anabaptists, and none show more clearly the degree to which Anabaptism was different in conviction and type from the intact and stable ways of magisterial Protestantism. The Anabaptists. . .believed that the Church of the Restitution, the True Church with its disciplined laymen. . .were forerunners of a time to come, in which the Lord would establish His people and His law throughout the earth.⁵²

The seriousness with which the Anabaptists approached the Great Commission is seen in the frequent commissioning services they held in barns, mills, forests, and caves. One of the songs sung at these services tells the story. From a rather long poem I have selected and translated a few verses:

As God His Son was sending
 Into this world of sin,
 His Son is now commanding
 That we this world should win.
 He sends us and commissions
 To preach the Gospel clear,
 To call upon all nations
 To listen and to hear.

To Thee, O God, we're praying,
 We're bent to do Thy will;
 Thy Word we are obeying,
 They glory we fulfill.
 All peoples we are telling
 To mend their sinful way,
 That they might cease rebelling,
 Lest judgment be their pay.

And if Thou, Lord, desire,
 And should it be Thy will
 That we taste sword and fire
 By those who thus would kill,
 Then comfort, pray, our loved ones
 And tell them, we've endured.
 And we shall see them yonder—
 Eternally secured.

Thy Word, O Lord, does teach us,
 And we do understand;
 Thy promises are with us
 Until the very end.
 Thou hast prepared a haven—
 Praised be Thy holy name.
 We laud Thee, God of heaven,
 Through Christ, our Lord. Amen!

The commissioning ceremony was observed by the entire congregation. In most cases the missionaries were married men, leaving wife and children behind; occasionally wives went with their husbands. In the event that the missionaries would be executed by "sword and fire," as expressed in the song, the Church was committed to take care of their widows and orphaned children.⁵³

Fourth, the era of renewal and pietism in Germany gave birth to a new thrust of world mission during the early part of the eighteenth century. Through the inspiration, vision, and motivation of men like Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1727) and Nikolaus Ludwig Count von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) there emerged an unprecedented mission movement that took the Great Commission very seriously, literally carrying the gospel to the ends of the earth.

At the close of that century God used the British shoemaker William Carey (1761-1834) to place a burden upon many Christians for the unevangelized peoples around the world. Obedience to the Great Commission became a central concept for men and women throughout Protestant Europe and America. This new awareness of the Christian obligation to "make disciples of all nations" gave rise to countless Christian denominations and congregations, loosely structured groups and firmly organized associations that were committed to carry out the Lord's mandate.

C. Insight From Psychology

One of the psycho-linguistic principles applied in language learning is repetition. The old adage that "repetition is the mother of all wisdom" may not be infallible, but it certainly has proven its worth many times. Whenever a concept or an action is repeated frequently enough it becomes part of one's spontaneous behaviour pattern. Life becomes conditioned by the impact of repetition. This may well have been Christ's reason for repeating the Great Commission on various occasions in the presence of his followers. It registered. Their minds became conditioned. They all went into mission work, except James who died as a true witness before he left Jerusalem.

I have already alluded to the value of including the Great Commission in a confession of faith that is frequently repeated. G.W. Peters makes this pertinent observation on that point:

It would be well for the church to realize the psychological significance and add the Great Commission of our Lord to the Apostles' Creed which is confess-

ed every Sunday in numerous churches. This could have wholesome results in the lives of many believers, engraving in the hearts and minds of participants a direction of life as well as a commission and responsibility.⁵⁴

The same psychological principle is operative in the Lord's mandate to teach his commandments diligently to our children in the house and at work, in the morning and evening. It could become a rewarding practice if we as members of Christian families would take leave of each other with these words, "As you go, make disciples!"

CONCLUSION

It is often said that mission cannot be taught, it must be caught. That also applies to the Great Commission. True, one can teach many things *about* the Great Commission, but the Commission *itself* demands obedience, not information. Yet the merit in teaching and learning about the Great Commission lies not so much in information *per se* as in the inspiration and motivation derived from it.

As my Father has sent me, so I send you. As you go, make disciples of all peoples. Having gone, preach the gospel to all creation; for repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in my name to all nations.

You will be witnesses unto me
to the ends of the earth
And I will abide with you
to the end of time.

The Great Commission is binding to the church of Jesus Christ and must be taught and lived diligently by creed and deed to every generation until Christ comes back.

NOTES

- 1 *Confession of Faith of the General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches* (Hillsboro, Kansas: The Board of Christian Literature, 1976), p. 16.
- 2 In his three-volume collection and description of the *Creeeds of Christendom* (6th rev. ed., Grand Rapids, Baker reprint 1977), Philip Schaff (1819-1893) lists not one creed that explicitly speaks of the Great Commission. Of course, he has omitted the 1573 *Waldensian Confession* as well as the 1632 *Anabaptist Dordrecht Confession* both of which do speak of the Great Commission. Recently David Hubbard published a book, *What We Evangelicals Believe* (1979). This exposition of the Fuller Confession of Faith also deals with the Great Commission.
- 3 All Scripture quotations are from the 1962 A.J. Holman edition of the Revised Standard Version, unless noted otherwise.
- 4 *Confession of Faith* 1976, p. 16.
- 5 Dr. David Ewert, editor of this book, translated the passage for this publication upon request of the author.
- 6 Howard Loewen, "Hearing the Word: The Great Commission." *Direction* (April, 1978), p. 33.
- 7 Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 85-86.
- 8 Not all reliable early manuscripts contain Mark 16:9-20 where the part of the Great Commission is found. For an examination of the textual problem see D. Edmond Hiebert's commentary, *Mark: A Portrait of the Servant* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), pp. 412-422. Samuel M. Zwemer offers a rather lengthy explanation of the problem from the perspective of a missionary statesman: *Into All the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943), pp. 69-86.
- 9 Hiebert, *Mark*, p. 418.
- 10 J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*. Trans. by David H. Freeman (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960), p. 12.
- 11 David M. Howard, *The Great Commission for Today* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1976), p. 17.

- 13 B.F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 294.
- 14 George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions*. Sixth Printing (Chicago: Moody Press, 1978), p. 173.
- 15 Howard, *Great Commission*, p. 53.
- 16 Karl Barth, "An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16-20" in *The Theology of Christian Mission*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), p. 57.
- 17 Barth, "Exegetical Study," pp. 58-59.
- 18 R.V.G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 276.
- 19 Howard, *Great Commission*, p. 54.
- 20 The German New Testament scholar, Adolf Schlatter (1852-1938) *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Stuttgart: Calw, 1953), p. 422 and the British Bible expositor R.V.G. Tasker (*Matthew*, p. 277), suggest the presence of the "five hundred Brethren." Barth ("Exegetical Study," p. 59) says that their presence "seems unlikely." An excellent essay on problems related to the various people involved in the account is Robert D. Culver's, "What is the Church's Commission? Some Exegetical Issues in Matthew 28:16-20" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 125 (1968), pp. 239-253.
- 21 Barth, "Exegetical Study," p. 59.
- 22 Cf. B. Gärtner, "Distinguish, Doubt" *The International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Ed. by Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), Vol. I, pp. 503-505.
- 23 Those interested in in-depth exegetical studies of the text may want to consult such works as: (a) Dennis Oliver's dissertation, "Make Disciples!" (Fuller Theological Seminary, 1974); (b) the critical exposition by Benjamin J. Hubbard, "The Matthean Redaction of a Primitive Apostolic Commissioning: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20" (University of Iowa 1973); (c) Cleon Roger's essay on "The Great Commission," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (September 1973), pp. 258-267; (d) Ernst Lohmeyer's excellent study entitled "Mir ist gegeben alle Gewalt im Himmel und auf Erden! Eine Exegese

- von Mt. 28:16-20," *In Memoriam Ernst Lohmeyer*, edited by Werner Schmauch (Stuttgart: Evangelisches Verlagswerk, 1951), pp. 22-49; and (e) the excellent articles by the renowned theologian Otto Michel, "Menschensohn und Völkerwelt," *Evangelische Missionszeitschrift* 2 (1941), pp. 257-267; and "Der Abschluss des Matthäusevangeliums," *Evangelische Theologie* 10 (1950), pp. 16-26.
- 24 Michel, "Menschensohn," pp. 161-162.
- 25 Hubbard, "Matthean Redaction," provides numerous examples of ancient installation practices, usually comprising five rather than three distinct events, pp. 25-67.
- 26 Archibald T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), p. 831ff.
- 27 Gustav Warneck, *Die evangelische Missionslehre* Vol IV: *Der Betrieb der Sendung*. Second edition (Gotha: Perthes, 1902), pp. 210-286.
- 28 Barth, "Exegetical Study," p. 60.
- 29 Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Revell, 1929), p. 321.
- 30 Culver, "Exegetical Issues," p. 24.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 244; cf. pp. 243-245.
- 32 A few of the better known works on group conversion—which I prefer to call "multipersonal conversion"—are: Georg Vicedom, "An Example of Group Conversion," *Practical Anthropology* 9 (May-June 1962), pp. 123-130; Alan R. Tippett, *Solomon Islands Christianity* (London: Lutherworth, 1967); J. Waskom Pickett, et. al., *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (South Pasadena: William Carey, 1973); Christian Keysser, *Gottes Weg ins Hubeland* (Neuendettelsau: Freimund, 1949); Don Richards, *Peace Child* (Third Ed. Glendale: Regal, 1976).
- 33 Morgan, *Matthew*, p. 321.
- 34 Barth, "Exegetical Study," p. 67.
- 35 Fritz Rienecker, *Das Evangelium des Matthäus* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1953), p. 378.
- 36 Richard R. DeRidder, "The Great Commission," in A

- World To Win*, ed by Roger S. Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), p. 47.
- 37 Blauw, *Missionary Nature*, - 87.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- 39 Quoted by Howard, *Great Commission*, p. 66.
- 40 Barth, "Exegetical Study," p. 64.
- 41 Patrick J. St. G. Johnstone, *Gebet für die Welt* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler, 1978), p. 16.
- 42 Ralph D. Winter, "Penetrating the Last Frontiers." A Chart on the World in Missionary Perspective. U. S. Center for World Mission, 1605 E. Elizabeth St., Pasadena, CA 91104. Cf. Johnstone, *Gebet*, p. 16.
- 43 Blauw, *Missionary Nature*, p.86.
- 44 Warneck, *Missionslehre*, Vol. 4, p. 223.
- 45 Elmer A. Martens, "Summary of Messages at Canadian Conference, July, 1979." (Xeroxed notes on file), p. 3.
- 46 Peters, *Theology*, p. 189.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 48 For the argument for and against the impact of the Great Commission in the apostolic church see Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), particularly chapters 3-5; Warneck, *Missionslehre* Vol. I, passim.
- 49 Peters, *Theology*, p. 174.
- 50 Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 59.
- 51 See Edman's valuable book, *Light in Dark Ages* (Wheaton: Van Kampen, 1949).
- 52 Franklin H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), p. 109. For an in-depth study of "The Great Commission in the Reformation" see my article by that title with the most important literature listed there. *Direction* (April, 1975), pp. 303-318.
- 53 Kasdorf, "Great Commission" *Direction* 1975, pp. 312-313.
- 54 Peters, *Theology*, pp. 177-178.