

The Great Commission in the New Testament¹

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In this article, our goal is to survey the theme of the Great Commission in the New Testament. While the phrase “Great Commission” is often applied to Jesus’ specific command to make disciples in Matt 28:19, in this chapter, we will use the term “Great Commission” more generally to mean all those passages which contain explicit or implicit commissions to evangelize. In other words, we will be asking: What does the New Testament teach about Christians’ obligation to share the gospel with non-believers?

The Gospels and Acts

Since the beginning of the modern missionary movement, the “Great Commission” in Matt 28:16-20 has often proved a rallying cry to missions-committed persons of various backgrounds.² We will take some time to focus on this text before looking more broadly at the Great Commission theme in the Gospels and Acts.

In Matt 28:19, Jesus instructs the apostles to “make disciples of all nations.”³ That is, the apostles are to make mature followers of Jesus Christ from people of every ethnicity.⁴ During Jesus’ earthly ministry, he focused his message on the Jews (Matt 10:6). But, now a new age in salvation history has dawned and the gospel is to go to all nations. How is it that the apostles are to make disciples of all nations? Jesus presents a three-step method:

(1) The apostles must take the initiative to go (Matt 28:19).⁵ To obey

Jesus’ command to make disciples of all nations, the apostles must first put themselves in direct contact with persons of different nationalities. As both intentional and unintentional contacts with non-believers continue, the disciples are to view these evangelistic encounters from a divine perspective.

(2) The apostles must bring persons to the point where they knowingly and publicly align themselves with Jesus Christ by declaring their faith through baptism (Matt 28:19). This baptism is in “the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”—implying that the one being baptized has come to know God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, the convert is not one unwillingly immersed, but one who has entered into conscious relationship with the triune God.

(3) The apostles are to teach the converts everything that Jesus has commanded (Matt 28:20). If the young converts are to become mature disciples, they must continue to be schooled in the apostles’ teaching—enabled by Christ’s indwelling Spirit—to love God and love neighbor (Matt 22:37-40).

One might ask, then—in light of Matt 28:16-20—how could anyone deny the Great Commission of the church? A number of persons have objected, however, to the use of this passage as a basis for the modern church’s evangelistic task. Some have protested that the instructions in Matt 28 were only given to the original apostles. These are instructions not for church, but for the *founding members* of the church. Yet, the commission to the apostles explicitly indicates that the apostles are to teach their converts

to “obey *everything*” that Jesus had commanded them—apparently including this Great Commission as well. Indeed, if the Great Commission in Matt 28 is only for the apostles, then the church should also not baptize persons since only the apostles were explicitly instructed to baptize.

Admittedly, there are some functions that only the apostles can fulfill; only the apostles can function as eyewitnesses of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:4-9). The post-apostolic church, however, can convey the apostles’ eyewitness testimony. Other repeatable functions of the apostles (going, baptizing, teaching, etc.) devolve upon the church as a whole and are manifested through a variety of gifted persons in local congregations (1 Cor 12:4-7). The Gospel authors clearly understand the majority of Jesus’ teaching as directly applicable to their contemporary audience (Matt 28:20)—and by logical extension, to later Christian audiences reading their works.

Others have objected to the modern church’s appropriation of the Great Commission by arguing that the gospel has already spread to all nations. If, in fact, the gospel has already been preached to all nations (by the apostles, or others), then the task has been fulfilled; it no longer remains for the church. Indeed, some New Testament texts seem to describe the gospel as having been preached to all nations (Rom 10:17-18; Col 1:5-6; Col 1:23; 1 Tim 3:16). In Mark 13:10, Jesus says “the gospel must first be preached to all nations,” and later in the same discourse he says that “all these things” (i.e., signs which precede his coming) must be fulfilled during the lifetime of his disciples (Mark 13:30). In Col 1:23, Paul asserts that the gospel has been “proclaimed to every creature under heaven.” Oddly enough, at

the same time, Paul continues to strive to preach the gospel in new territories (Rom 15:19-24).

It seems that the best way to understand these puzzling texts is in light of the salvation-historical scheme given in the Bible (i.e., the overarching framework of God progressively working in history to save mankind). Prior to Christ’s death and resurrection, the gospel was preached to the Jews (Matt 10:6).⁶ By Jesus’ resurrection, however, God inaugurates the climactic period of his saving plan; the activity of God is no longer centered in Jerusalem but is present wherever his Spirit indwells the living temple of his people. News of God’s salvation is now announced to all peoples in the sense that all ethnic groups without exception are now objects of that gospel’s proclamation.

Finally, some persons have objected to the Great Commission on the grounds that it is a culturally-conditioned command. Such persons would say that we now recognize that there are many world religions, and it is bigoted of us to try to convert other people to our way of thinking.⁷ In other words, we should reject the close-mindedness of ancient societies in favor of the tolerance and open-mindedness of modern cultures.

It is undeniable that some commands of the Bible are culturally-conditioned (e.g., “Greet one another with a holy kiss,” Rom 16:16). Yet, even with these culturally-conditioned commands, we must seek to obey their core supra-cultural principles. For example, modern Americans may not greet their Christian brothers with a kiss, but they should greet them in a warm, sincere, culturally-appropriate way (e.g., with a hearty handshake).

Scholarly claims to culturally-conditioned teachings can in fact be veiled

attempts to judge the teachings of the Bible according to modern philosophies and predilections. In reality, to claim that the church should not seek to convert persons to the Christian faith is to deny the truthfulness of Scripture; it is to say that our modern opinions are correct and that the Bible is wrong. Human opinion becomes the final authority of truth rather than God's revelation.

Beyond the famous Matt 28 text, the Great Commission is found throughout the Gospels. We find similarly climactic instructions at the end of Luke and John. In Luke 24:46-49, we read,

[Jesus] told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

While in Matthew the Great Commission is given as a command, here in Luke it appears as a prediction.⁸ Jesus gives a straightforward summary of biblical prophecy: "repentance and forgiveness of sins *will be preached* in [Christ's] name to all nations" (Luke 24:47). Although it appears that many Christians are failing in the completion of the Great Commission, the ultimate success of this task is not in doubt. God has guaranteed its results. The certain triumph of God's plan, however, does not call us to laziness but confident diligence (Matt 25:1-46). In proclaiming the gospel, we know we are busy with a winning and important task. And, we know that we will give an account of our stewardship when the Savior appears (1 John 2:28-3:3).

In the "Lukan Great Commission" of

Luke 24, we also note that the spreading of the gospel is depicted in geographical terms. It begins "at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). And, as Luke later tells us in volume 2 (Acts), the gospel moves on to the whole region of Judea, Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This geographical spread of the gospel also overlaps with a broader salvation-historical scheme, for the gospel is first proclaimed in Jewish regions but quickly moves into non-Jewish territory.

Paul also speaks of the gospel spreading from a geographical perspective in Romans. In Rom 15:19, he writes, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum (modern day Yugoslavia), I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." From Paul's comments, we can see he not only pictures the gospel spreading geographically (and by extension, to various ethnicities in those geographical loci), but he thought of the preaching of the gospel in *representative* terms. In other words, not every literal person from Jerusalem to Illyricum had heard the gospel from Paul, but the apostle was already moving to new territories. Paul's desire to preach in completely unreached areas (Rom 15:19-20) coupled with his confidence that the gospel, once present, would spread (Col 1:6; 1 Thess 1:8) pushed him to ever-new groundbreaking work.⁹

In Luke 24:48, we also note that the unique eyewitness role of the apostles is mentioned ("you are witnesses of these things"), though post-apostolic preaching of the gospel is not denied. Finally, Luke highlights that this triumphant spread of the gospel is not based on human power, but on the personal presence of God's Spirit. The disciples, in fact, are not to begin their mission until they have been "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49).

The book of Acts continues this theme of the gospel's Spirit-empowered advance across ever-increasing geographic expanses. Again and again, the Spirit empowers and directs the church to spread the good news that Jesus died to provide forgiveness to lost and condemned persons (Acts 1:8; 2:4, 17-18; 4:8, 31; 5:32; 6:10; 8:29, 39; 9:31; 10:19, 44; 11:12; 13:2, 4).

The Gospel of John also has an explicit statement of the Great Commission, but it differs somewhat from both Matthew and Luke. In 20:19-23, the Apostle John reports:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

In this resurrection appearance, Jesus begins by announcing "peace" to his disciples. While the traditional Jewish greeting of "Shalom" certainly underlies Jesus' greeting, the term is here pregnant with theological significance. By his death and resurrection, Jesus is able to announce the cessation of God's wrath against those formerly under his just condemnation (John 3:36). Now, through Christ, believers can be ushered into the realm of God's blessing and favor—his Shalom.

After announcing God's peace to the disciples, Jesus commissions them with language that draws a parallel to his own mission. The Father sent Jesus into the

world; now Jesus sends the disciples.¹⁰ As in Luke's account, the Spirit provides the ability for this mission. Whether symbolic of the coming Pentecost or an expression of the disciples' regeneration, Jesus breathes on them and instructs them to "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

After this infusion of the Spirit (whether proleptic or real), Jesus focuses on the weighty message and consequent stewardship of the gospel commission. Jesus' disciples announce the news that will divide for eternity the forgiven from the unforgiven. This point is made in starkest terms by Jesus' statement: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). Taken out of context, this verse might seem to imply that the disciples have in themselves the ability to forgive or retain sins. Read within the immediate and broader context, however, it is clear that only through the Spirit-led proclamation of the gospel do the disciples exercise this function. They are Christ's ambassadors, answering the world's question, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" (John 6:28). The disciples are to repeat faithfully the answer of their master: "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:29). To those who reject that message, Christ's messengers must with sadness and honesty declare that the wrath of God remains on them (John 3:36). It is in this way even today that modern Christians continue to function as an authoritative conduit for God's forgiving or retaining of sins.

In seeking for the most explicit statement of the Great Commission in Mark, we are probably right to look to Mark 13:10 where Jesus states, "The gospel must first be preached to all nations." Although in

Mark 16:15 we find the imperative, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation,” the best and most ancient manuscripts of Mark end at 16:8.¹¹ Thus, while the commission in Mark 16:15 is correct theologically in that it corresponds to Scriptures like Matt 28:19, we would do well not to quote later additions of Scripture as if they have Scriptural authority. By quoting from Mark 16:15, we seem to legitimize other portions of Mark 16:9-20, some of which present theological problems. The key question, of course, is whether Mark 16:9-20 was originally part of the Gospel that Mark wrote, and the overwhelming answer from the experts on the subject is no.¹²

Because of the brevity of this chapter, we are not able to survey the many other occurrences—both explicit and implicit—of the Great Commission in the Gospels and Acts. The reader is invited to ponder anew how many of Jesus’ actions and teachings imply the continuing advance of God’s kingdom through the evangelistic and transforming presence of his church. While Jesus and his followers appeared in his day as small and unimportant as a mustard seed, this Messiah’s most unusual kingdom would one day be better described as the largest plant in the garden (Matt 13:31-32).

The Pauline Epistles

There is no doubt that Paul viewed himself and the other apostles as instruments to spread God’s word to the ends of the world (Rom 15:19-24; Gal 2:7-9). There is some question, though, as to what evangelistic role Paul envisioned for non-apostles. The apparent lack of explicit commands to evangelize in his letters has led some to claim that Paul envisioned a more passive or attractive evangelistic

role for the local congregations.¹³ Outward-directed mission was preserved for Paul and his co-workers. By extension, some authors who take this view suggest that God may raise up individuals apart from local congregations to complete the missionary task today—analogous to the way God raised up apostles and apostolic co-workers in Paul’s day.¹⁴

There are several flaws with this approach. Most significantly, the Pauline epistles *do* contain explicit imperatives to evangelize, though not as many as we might first expect. While the translation of Phil 2:16 is debated, it seems best to understand the text as an imperative to “hold out the word of life” (i.e., the gospel).¹⁵ Indeed, while not a command, earlier in this letter, Paul has already described approvingly the evangelistic activity of “most of the brothers” in Rome (Phil 1:14). Paul repeats similar commendations to the Thessalonians, from whom the word of the Lord has rung forth (1 Thess 1:8).¹⁶ A careful attention to context will also show that some of Paul’s commands to imitate him include an evangelistic component (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1).¹⁷ Furthermore, Eph 6:15 (“feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace”) is best understood as a Pauline exhortation to evangelistic readiness.¹⁸ Finally, Col 4:5-6 exhorts the congregation to evangelistic conversation, though admittedly Paul here only speaks explicitly of *response* to outsiders’ direct inquiries.¹⁹

In spite of these texts surveyed above, given Paul’s extensive comments on other ethical and theological issues, it is still somewhat puzzling that he does not provide more reflection on the evangelistic obligation of his congregations. There are several possible reasons for this: (1) Paul prefers to emphasize divine rather

than human activity in the spread of the gospel (e.g., Col 1:5-6; 1 Thess 1:5; 2 Thess 2:13; 3:1-2).²⁰ (2) Paul frequently describes the congregations or persons to whom he is writing as suffering (e.g., Rom 8:16-17; Gal 6:12; Phil 1:29-30; 1 Thess 2:14-16; 3:3-4; 2 Tim 1:8; 2:3; 3:12). In light of this reality, we can conclude that the early Christians were effectively making their presence known. A command to proclaim the gospel would be superfluous. It is the ongoing proclamation of the gospel (through word and deed) that creates the situation of persecution.²¹ (3) Paul describes the activity of the apostles and the activity of the churches in such parallel fashion, that it seems best to conclude that all but the non-repeatable functions of the apostles (i.e., *eyewitness* testimony and possibly more sensational miracles) devolve upon the churches.²² (4) Paul's understanding of the gospel as God's dynamic word that inevitably moves forward and accomplishes the divine purpose provides a theological basis for the church's mission. For example, in Col 1:6, Paul writes, "All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." As we see in this passage, for Paul, when the gospel is genuinely present in a congregation, he is confident that the dynamic nature of that word will guarantee its ongoing triumphant progress. Many other passages can be cited to show that Paul viewed the gospel as God's dynamic and effective word (e.g., Rom 1:16; 15:18-19; 1 Cor 1:17-25; 4:15; 9:12; 14:36; 15:1-2; Col 3:16-17; 1 Thess 1:5-8; 2:13-16).²³

While scholars are right to remind us that the church is to have an attractive missionary function, this more passive

ministry does not deny or mitigate the church's ongoing outward-directed evangelistic task. Not everyone in a local congregation will sell everything and travel as itinerant evangelists; in fact, most will not. Local congregations *as a whole* inherit this missionary commission from the apostles, and depending on an individual person's gifts, supernatural leading, and life circumstances, obedience to this commission will be manifested in a variety of ways.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to survey the theme of the Great Commission in the New Testament. Because of space limitations, we discussed only the Gospels, Acts, and the Pauline Epistles.²⁴ We have seen that the New Testament authors expect all Christians to be involved in taking the gospel to the unevangelized. We have also seen that it would be a mistake to think of this commission solely in terms of explicit imperatives. While some New Testament materials (e.g., Matt 28:19) emphasize the command to evangelize, others (e.g., Acts) focus on the role of God's Spirit in empowering and directing the gospel's spread. Still other sections of the New Testament (e.g., Paul's letters) prefer to speak of the gospel spreading from a divine perspective; they picture the gospel as God's dynamic word that inevitably accomplishes his purpose.

The New Testament materials are rich and varied in their discussions of mission. It is incumbent upon modern churches to mirror this depth in our current missiological study. Equally important, our theological reflection must be accompanied by prayer, passion, and obedient activity.

ENDNOTES

¹This article originally appeared in *The Challenge of the Great Commission: Essays on God's Mandate for the Local Church* (ed. Thom S. Rainer and Chuck Lawless; Crestwood, KY: Pinnacle, 2005). Reprinted with permission.

²The first chapter of William Carey's famous *Enquiry* is titled "An Enquiry whether the Commission given by our Lord to his Disciples be not still binding on us" (William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* [Leicester: Ann Ireland, 1792; facsimile, London: Carey Kingsgate, 1961], 7-13). Harry R. Boer documents the dominance of the Great Commission in modern missionary thought in *Pentecost and Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Lutterworth, 1961), 15-27.

³Scripture quotations come from the New International Version (NIV).

⁴The English translation "nations" might mislead the modern reader as one usually associates a geopolitical entity with the term rather than an ethnicity—as is indicated by the Greek original, *ethnē*.

⁵Though the word *poreuthentes* is a participle, it is imperatival in force. Matthew frequently combines a participle with a finite verb; in such cases the participle is often best understood as expressing attendant circumstances.

⁶Similarly, the Old Testament authors primarily envision the mission of the nation of Israel as centripetal or attractive. The surrounding nations are expected to make a pilgrimage to Zion, rather than the Jews to go

to the surrounding nations (e.g., 2 Chr 6:32; Isa 66:20).

⁷A classic, early presentation of this view is found in Paul Wernle, *The Rise of the Religion*, vol. 1 of *The Beginnings of Christianity* (ed. W. D. Morrison, trans. G. A. Bienemann, Theological Translation Library, vol. 15; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903), 343.

⁸The predictive form of Luke 24:47 also has an imperatival function, as does the parallel in Acts 1:8.

⁹In reference to Rom 15:19, Adolf von Harnack writes, "The fundamental idea is that the gospel has to be preached everywhere during the short remaining space of the present world-age, while at the same time this is only feasible by means of mission-tours across the world. The fire it is assumed, will spread right and left spontaneously from the line of flame." (*The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* [ed. and trans. James Moffatt, 2nd ed.; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1908], 1:73-74). Günther Bornkamm agrees, "Romans 15:19 is therefore anything but adventitious and exaggerated. Instead, it expresses the apostle's amazing confidence that the gospel needed only to be preached for it to spread automatically: starting from the various cities it would reach out to the whole of the country round about and pervade it" (*Paul* [trans. D. M. G. Stalker; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 54).

¹⁰One must be careful not to overstate the parallels. Jesus' mission was unique in many senses and is unrepeatable. Only Jesus could die

for the sins of humanity. Only Jesus was sent from heaven. See Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹¹For more detailed discussion on this textual issue, see Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1009-21.

¹²A *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* reads, "On the basis of good external evidence and strong internal considerations it appears that the earliest ascertainable form of the Gospel of Mark ended with 16:8"; Bruce M. Metzger, ed., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament* [third edition] (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), 126.

¹³For example, see W. Paul Bowers, "Church and Mission in Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44 (1991): 89-111; idem, "Studies in Paul's Understanding of His Mission" (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 1976), 103-21; cf. Terence L. Donaldson, "The Absence in Paul's Letters of Any Injunction to Evangelize" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Nashville, TN, November 2000), 1-14; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (American Society of Missiology Series 16; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 137-38, 168-69.

¹⁴E.g., Bowers, "Church and Mission in Paul," 111. Cf. Ralph D. Winter, "The Two Structures of God's Redemptive Mission," *Missiology* 2 (1974): 121-39; Arthur F. Glasser, "The Apostle Paul and the Missionary Task," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne; rev. ed.; Pasadena: William Carey Library; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), A125-33; Edward F. Murphy, "The Missionary Society as an Apostolic Team," *Missiology* 4 (1976): 103-18; Michael C. Griffiths, "Today's Missionary, Yesterday's Apostle," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 21 (1985): 154-65.

¹⁵See James Patrick Ware, "'Holding Forth the Word of Life': Paul and the Mission of the Church in the Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Second Temple Judaism" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1996).

¹⁶See J. Ware, "The Thessalonians as a Missionary Congregation: 1 Thessalonians 1, 5-8," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83 (1992): 126-31.

¹⁷See Robert L. Plummer, "Imitation of Paul and the Church's Missionary Role in 1 Corinthians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 219-35.

¹⁸For further discussion, see the following works that defend an evangelistic reading of Eph 6:15: Leon Morris, *Expository Reflections on the Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 206; Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992),

111; idem, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 157.

¹⁹Colossians 4:5-6 reads, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."

²⁰This point is made effectively by Peter T. O'Brien, *Gospel and Mission in the Writings of Paul: An Exegetical and Theological Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 138.

²¹For further discussion of suffering and the church's mission, see Robert L. Plummer, "The Church's Missionary Nature: The Apostle Paul and His Churches" (Ph.D. diss., Louisville, KY: The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 173-98.

²²E.g., we see a parallel in prayer (1 Thess 3:12; 1 Tim 2:1-4), teaching and building up the church (Rom 15:14; 2 Cor 12:19; Eph 4:11-16; Col 1:28), suffering (Rom 8:16-17; 1 Cor 4:9-13; Phil 1:29-30), divine confirmation of the gospel through miracles (Rom 15:18-19; 1 Cor 12:9-30; Gal 3:5), etc. For further discussion see *Ibid.*

²³For more detailed study on this topic, see Robert L. Plummer, "A Theological Basis for the Church's Mission in Paul," *Westminster Theological Journal* 64 (2002): 253-71. For a similar theme in Acts, see Brian S. Rosner, "The Progress of the Word," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson; Grand Rapids:

Eerdmans 1998), 215-33.

²⁴For a more comprehensive treatment of the biblical texts, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 11; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001).