

“To All The Nations”: The Great Commission Passages in the Gospels and Acts

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THE WORDS OF Charles Spurgeon often cause me to halt whatever I am doing, think seriously about my responsibility, and repent of my apathy. Seldom are the words as gripping, though,

as these words spoken to his Pastor’s College Annual Conference in 1874:

I plead this day for those who cannot plead for themselves, namely, the great outlying masses of the heathen world. Our existing pulpits are tolerably well supplied, but we need men who will build on new foundations. Who will do this? Are we, as a company of faithful men, clear in our consciences about the heathen? Millions have never heard the Name of Jesus. Hundreds of millions have seen a missionary only once in their lives, and know nothing

of our King. Shall we let them perish? Can we go to our beds and sleep, while China, India, Japan, other nations are being damned?¹

This masterful nineteenth-century English preacher was a wordsmith like few others, especially when speaking about the Great Commission. Spurgeon stated these words almost 150 years ago, but they remain relevant and challenging today. Rarely has the church seen the opportunity we have today to take the gospel to the ends of the earth.

If Spurgeon’s words grip us, however, those words pale when compared to the words of the Lord Jesus. When he speaks, our response should be humble gratitude and unquestioned obedience simply because he is the Son of God. It was he, the one in whom “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9), who uttered the mandate that is the focus of this article—the command commonly known as the “Great Commission” (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45-49;

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John 20:19-23; Acts 1:6-8).² Spoken at least four times from the lips of Jesus, the Great Commission clearly matters to God.

The primary purpose of this article is to review Jesus' varied expressions of the Great Commission in the Gospels and Acts, focusing on the authority of Christ, the command to make disciples, the primacy of proclamation, and the empowerment of the disciples. A secondary goal is to offer suggestions for local church leaders who seek to lead Great Commission churches.

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

Both the repetition and the location of the Great Commission passages imply seriousness and significance behind the commission. All four of the Gospels include some type of statement of sending, going, or proclaiming near the end, suggesting a climactic purpose behind the textual positioning. Acts 1:8 differs, of course, but that text serves more as a rough outline and theme verse of Luke's second volume than it does a climax.³ That difference notwithstanding, it is undeniable that near the end of his ministry, and at the beginning of the church's mission, Christ called believers to take the gospel to the nations.

The best known and most quoted expression of the Great Commission is Matthew 28:16-20:

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. When they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."⁴

More than one writer has noted that these final verses of Matthew's Gospel summarize his central themes, including the authority of Christ, the

universality of the gospel, the necessity of discipleship, the significance of worship and faith, and the power of the abiding presence of Christ.⁵ More specifically, the one who is the fulfillment of the covenants and prophecies of the Old Testament now is the center of a message to be carried to the ends of the earth.

In this Matthean passage, the one who spoke the commission is the one who had been given "all authority" (28:18) to do so. The authority of Christ is not a new theme in this Gospel (see, e.g., Matt 7:29; 10:1, 7-8; 11:27; 22:43-44; 24:35). His power to defeat the devil (4:1-11), to teach like no other (7:28-29), to calm nature (8:23-27), to forgive sin (9:1-8), and to heal the sick (9:27-31) had already been established. In what is likely a reference to the Son of Man imagery of Daniel 7:13-14, he is now the resurrected one before whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil 2:9-11). The Father has now granted him authority over all of heaven and earth.⁶ He had, and has, "the divine right, as ruler over all, to give all Christians their marching orders."⁷

A similar sense of authority, albeit described differently, is depicted in John's Great Commission text. In John's Gospel, Jesus is the one with authority to send the disciples, even as the Father had sent him (John 20:21, cf. 17:18). Jesus came to earth to fulfill the Father's purpose—a purpose tied inextricably to the message of atonement that the disciples carry to the nations. The world needs to hear that the Son is also the Savior:

Jesus saw a close identification between himself and his Father. He spoke regularly of the Father's having sent him. He and the Father are one, and so the work that the Son did was also the work of the Father. Jesus came for the purpose of giving his life as a ransom, a means of liberating those people who were enslaved to sin. He offered himself as a substitute for them.⁸

Moreover, he who had been the one sent is now the sender. Andreas Köstenberger, in his study on

the “sending” motif of John’s gospel, concludes that Jesus as the sent one was to bring glory and honor to the sender, do the sender’s will by working his works and speaking his words, witness to the sender and represent him accurately, and know the sender intimately by living in relationship with him and following his example.⁹ Now, Jesus is the one sending, and the disciples’s “relationship to *their* sender, Jesus, is to reflect *Jesus’* relationship with *his* sender, the Father.”¹⁰

The Word who became flesh (John 1:1-14) has the authority to require as much. In the words of Christopher Wright, “the identity and the authority of Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the cosmic indicative on which the mission imperative stands authorized.”¹¹ That is, we do the Great Commission because the living Son of God demands that we do so.

Properly teaching this foundational truth would likely change the commitment of most local churches to the Great Commission. Perhaps believers are less obedient to the Great Commission because they do not fully recognize the nature of the one who gave the command. If Christ is perceived as less than the Son of God before whom all will be judged (2 Cor 5:10), his words lose their force; a low Christology leads to a diminished Great Commission focus. On the other hand, truly knowing the majesty and power of the Son should lead to a deep desire to proclaim his name—and consequently, an uncompromised obedience to his Matthew 28 command.

THE COMMAND TO MAKE DISCIPLES

Matthew records that the risen Jesus met with his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, thus continuing the theme of mountaintop events in Matthew’s gospel (14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 26:30). Jesus’ mandate to them was clear: “go and make disciples of all nations.” The imperative—the command—in the text is “make disciples” rather than “go.” “Go” is better translated as the participial phrase, “As you are going” or “having gone,”

suggesting that the disciples were to make disciples wherever they were, in any context and with any people.

That is not to say, however, that “go” loses its imperatival force or international focus in this case. D. A. Carson’s analysis is helpful here. Not only does a participle used in this fashion often function as a command, but “in a context that demands that this ministry extend to ‘all nations,’ it is difficult to believe that ‘go’ has lost all imperatival force.”¹² In Wright’s words, “they [the disciples] will have to go to the nations as a necessary condition of obeying the primary command” to make disciples.¹³

That is, the disciples are not to wait for non-believers to come to them; rather, they are to take the initiative to evangelize. Such evangelism models the heart of God, whose Son came to his own, became flesh, and dwelt among us (John 1:11, 14). He who died for us while we were yet sinners (Rom 5:8) demands that his followers take that good news to the ends of the earth. Through that ministry, believers from the corners of the globe will enter the kingdom (Matt 8:11).

“AND MAKE DISCIPLES”

The task is not finished with evangelizing, however. “Make disciples” is an equally non-negotiable element of the Great Commission. Indeed, the process includes leading a non-believer to trust in Christ and repent from sin, followed by directing that new Christian in the lifelong task of walking with Christ in obedience. The former is marked by baptism, and the latter is accomplished through teaching (28:19). New Testament scholar Robert Plummer describes this responsibility of the church as follows:

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.

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).¹⁴

The goal is that those who follow Christ will live like Christ and lead others to do the same. Believers are to be “learners commanded to produce more learners.”¹⁵ Hence, a process of making disciples that ends with only the conversion of the evangelized is incomplete at best, disobedient at worst. In fact, the results of this omission can be disastrous. Untaught believers are ill equipped to face trials, untrained to recognize false teachings, and unprepared to teach others. They quickly become easy prey for an enemy who seeks to devour them (1 Pet 5:8).

Here, the contemporary church faces at least three issues. First, most local churches are doing neither evangelism nor discipleship strategically. For example, an increasingly lower number of baptisms in the Southern Baptist churches at least implies that we are neither evangelizing nor raising up believers committed to evangelism.¹⁶ Carrying out both components of the Great Commission is biblically required, but doing both begins with doing at least one of the two. The inherent struggle with balancing evangelism and discipleship is non-existent if neither is occurring in the first place.

Second, where evangelizing is taking place, follow-up discipleship is often neglected. Baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit may be occurring, but teaching to follow all that Jesus commanded somehow gets lost in the process. The result is now multi-generational spiritual weakness: undisciplined believers are serving as leaders in

our churches, and they are doing little to disciple the newest believers. Great Commission obedience is seldom found in believers who should be eating the meat of God's word, but who are still feeding on the milk (cf. 1 Cor 3:1-3, Heb 5:12).

Third, young pastors seeking to correct this problem must be aware of the danger of emphasizing discipleship to the neglect of evangelism. Clearly, the problem must be addressed, but teaching and training alone produce a classroom more than a New Testament church. Genuine discipleship turns out believers committed to doing everything Jesus commanded—including evangelism.

THE CALL TO THE “NATIONS”

Jesus' disciples heard this command on the mountain: they were to make disciples of “all the nations” (*panta ta ethnē*). Luke's Gospel (24:47) also employs the same phrase, where Jesus challenged his disciples to proclaim the word to all the nations. Though not using the term “nations,” Mark's call to “go into all the world” (16:15) echoes a similar mandate.

Scholars have understood the term “nations” here in at least two ways.¹⁷ Some understand the term as referring only to Gentiles, an interpretation likely built on a belief that God had ultimately rejected the Jews who had first rejected him. Others view “nations” as “peoples” or “ethnic groups.” Gentiles and Jews alike would have thus been included in this call. The gospel would be for all the world, not only the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 10:6).

The latter interpretation best captures the intent of Matthew 28, the concluding chapter in a book that shows God's concern for the world. God's love for Israel is evident throughout this book (9:36; 10:5-6; 15:24). In fact, the Gospel of Matthew is about God's fulfilling his covenant with Abraham; the blessings through the patriarch would come to all families of the earth (Gen 12:3) through Jesus. At the same time, Matthew's Gospel illustrates God's concern for non-Jews,

including magi (2:1-12), a Roman centurion (8:5-13), and a Syro-Pheonician woman (15:22-28). Included in the genealogy of Jesus were at least two women—Rahab and Ruth—who were Gentiles (1:5). Jesus’ Great Commission words in Matthew 28 could thus be viewed, argues Wright, as “a christological mutation of the original Abrahamic commission—‘Go ... and be a blessing ... and all nations of the earth will be blessed through you.’”¹⁸

Additionally, as John Piper has so thoroughly shown, the best interpretation of *panta ta ethnē* is “all the people groups” rather than “Gentile individuals” or “countries.”¹⁹ Piper’s argument is based on word study and biblical teachings. Regarding the former, he points out that the singular form of *ethnos* in the New Testament always means people group or nation, and the phrase *panta ta ethnē* more often refers to people groups or is ambiguous in meaning than to Gentile individuals. Regarding the latter, Piper concludes that the Old Testament promise to Abraham to bless the nations (Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4)—later referred to in the New Testament (e.g., Gal 3:6-8)—forms the basis for a people group focus in the church’s mission. Piper’s arguments are not limited to these noted, but all of his arguments lead to this conclusion: “In all likelihood, Jesus did not send his apostles out with a general mission merely to win as many individuals as they could but rather to reach all the peoples of the world and thus to gather the ‘sons of God’ who are scattered.”²⁰

One should not deduce, however, that group conversion must be the only goal of the church. Group conversions can happen, particularly in tribal settings, but the text itself does not demand that. Both Craig Blomberg and Hal Freeman have pointed out that a shift from the neuter word *ethnē* (“nations”) to the masculine pronoun *autous* (“them”) in verse 19 indicates that “them” refers to individuals rather than nations.²¹ The mandate, then, is to make disciples of individuals from all people groups of the world.

Luke’s Gospel (24:47) and Acts (1:8) describe this task geographically, with the church begin-

ning its work in Jerusalem and extending to the ends of the earth. There the gospel would first be proclaimed in Jewish territory, but would be followed by ever-broadening proclamation to the peoples of the world. The starting point of Jerusalem reflects not only a Lukan emphasis on the Holy City, but also “the reversal of the missionary movement from centripetal [in the Old Testament] to centrifugal, as indicated in Acts 1:8.”²² The church would now take the initiative to go to the nations, as evidenced in this reminder of the Great Commission texts:

- (1) Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of *all the nations*.”
- (2) Mark 16:15, “Go into *all the world* and preach the gospel to *all creation*.”
- (3) Luke 24:45, “repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to *all the nations*.”
- (4) Acts 1:8, “...and even to *the remotest part of the earth*.”

Southern Baptists who are aware of the International Mission Board’s work will recognize the people group approach in the current EMBRACE emphasis. International Mission Board president Tom Elliff has challenged all SBC churches to embrace one of 3,800 unengaged, unreached people groups. These people groups are less than 2 percent reached with the gospel, and no one is known to be currently engaging them with an intentional church planting strategy.²³ The goal—to get the gospel to all individuals in all people groups who have not heard—reflects the New Testament emphasis on reaching people groups.

Emphasizing people groups is not limited to international fields, however. Current research reveals that 584 unengaged, unreached people groups are also represented in North America.²⁴ Given that most will be found in urban settings—where more than 80 percent of the population of North America now reside—the opportunities for touching the globe while serv-

ing Christ on this continent abound.²⁵

Such an emphasis may well be a starting point for turning a church toward the Great Commission. In my almost 15 years as a church consultant, I have seen two significant issues that stand in the way of a church's growth—a lack of outward focus, and a failure to plan strategically. Though they would not be inclined to admit it, many churches focus only on meeting internal needs, with little regard for the non-believing world around them. In addition, many operate with no long-term vision or strategy, choosing instead to function on a Sunday-to-Sunday basis. An intentional commitment to engage a specific people group will demand improvements in both areas.

THE CENTRALITY OF PROCLAMATION

The Gospel of Luke ends with this challenging directive:

Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:44-49).

Surprising two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus taught them about himself as revealed in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms; that is, he taught them that the Old Testament is itself a book about him. As one writer has summarized, "The Old Testament—they would see now with the new light cast upon it—showed the necessity of an *atoning* Redeemer, from the *sin* which it everywhere reveals, and of a *dying* Redeemer, from the *death* which it proclaims as the consequence."²⁶

He who opened their eyes to him (Luke 24:31) also opened their minds (24:45) to understand the Scriptures he explained (or "opened") to them (24:32). Jesus led them to understand (1) that the Old Testament speaks of his suffering and resurrection (e.g., Ps 22; Isa 53) and, (2) to see his story in those writings. He likely taught them that the message of calling the nations to him is a clarion call in that same testament (e.g., Ps 67; Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:3; Acts 26:22–23).

PROCLAIMING REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

Luke 24:47 best states the author's understanding of the Great Commission: "repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." The reader will likely recognize that Luke's expression is similar to the debatable passage in Mark ("preach the gospel to all creation") and to the thematic verse of Acts 1:8 ("you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem ... and to the ends of the earth"). Though not directly addressing the Lukan passage, William Hendrickson's understanding of John 17:18 and 20:21 ties the Johannine Great Commission text to Luke as well:

The two comparisons [between the Father's sending the Son, and the Son's sending the disciples] blend into one idea, which is this: just as the Father has sent Jesus into the world *with a message*, so also Jesus has sent the disciples into the world *with a message*.²⁷

Without question, proclamation—that is, verbally speaking the message—is essential to doing the Great Commission. That should not be surprising, if indeed one believes Romans 10:14—"How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?" Apart from hearing the gospel, no person in any people group of the world can be saved; thus, proclaiming the word

is imperative. As Piper has rightly noted, “The frontline of missions is the preaching of the Word of God, the gospel.”²⁸

This gospel is a gospel of suffering and death—the death of the Son of God who had to die and rise again to fulfill Scripture and to bring redemption to a lost world. His death was the means by which forgiveness of sins would be offered, and repentance would be a necessary step in gaining that pardon. Through preaching this gospel, Jesus’ disciples would “announce the news that will divide for eternity the forgiven from the unforgiven.”²⁹ Some would find forgiveness through faith and repentance; others would remain unforgiven in rebellion (John 20:23). In a first-century world that was haunted by unresolved guilt over wrong, the forgiveness Jesus offered was surely a welcomed answer to some.³⁰

At the same time, this combination of repentance and forgiveness—common in the Luke/Acts volumes (see Luke 24:47; Acts 5:31; 8:22)—undoubtedly shows that forgiveness does not come apart from repentance. The disciples were to echo John the Baptist (Matt 3:1-2; Mark 1:4) and Jesus himself (Matt 4:17) in demanding repentance even as they proclaimed forgiveness. The contemporary church that has been so reticent to demand repentance would be wise to take note of this mandate again. Preaching without a call to repent is not Great Commission preaching.

The disciples were also “witnesses” (here and in Acts 1:8 understood to be those who had seen the events described and could testify to them), and their witness added credibility to their message. In the sermonic words of the preacher Warren Wiersbe, the disciples were to be “both preachers (heralds of a message) and witnesses (sharers of an experience) of what the Lord had done for them and said to them.”³¹ This they are to do in the power and authority of his name, and this they did throughout the book of Acts (e.g., Acts 2:38; 3:6, 16; 4:10, 12, 17-18, 30; 5:28, 40; 8:12, 16; 9:27-28; 10:43, 48; 16:18; 19:5). In the name of Jesus people would be saved and disciples made.

At least two challenges for the local church come to mind. First, church leaders must honestly consider how clearly and recurrently we proclaim the good news of Jesus. In some cases, messages address needs but not our greatest need: the need for a forgiving Savior. In other cases, preaching is so dominated by what we stand against that the lost world never fully hears the good news. Neither sermon is a Great Commission sermon; the former never gets to the real problem, and the latter never gets to the answer.

Second, young preachers increasingly interested in social justice and New Testament social ministry (and rightly so) must remember that it is the word of the cross that is the power of God unto salvation (1 Cor 1:18). We older leaders who wrongly backed away from social ministry for fear of losing our evangelistic focus have much to learn from the younger generation here—but all of us must fight to keep primary the proclamation of the gospel. Much more common than a return to gospel-centered preaching is a subtle slide away from it.

THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE DISCIPLES

Most striking in the Great Commission texts covered in this article are the surrounding accounts of the disciples’s behavior and thinking. In Matthew’s Gospel, at least the eleven remaining disciples (and perhaps more of his followers) gathered at the mountain Jesus had designated (28:16). When they saw him, some worshipped him and some were doubtful (28:17). Scholars differ about the number of followers present, and not all commentators agree on the nature of the doubt in the crowd. Nevertheless, it is possible that some of the eleven worshipped the risen Christ, while others “were less sure how to react.”³² Some simply struggled to accept the resurrection.

Mark’s account, while disputed, still reflects a similar teaching of the remaining Gospels: the disciples were slow to learn. Indeed, Mark indicates that some did not believe Mary’s report about the

resurrection (16:11), and some refused to believe the two disciples to whom Jesus appeared while they were walking (16:12-13). Disbelief in a resurrection might seem sensible, but Jesus reproached the eleven “for their unbelief and hardness of heart” (16:14). In the very next verse, though, he calls these same men to preach the gospel to all creation!

Luke’s Great Commission passage is also preceded by stories of disciples who struggled to believe the resurrection (24:13-27, 36-39). The account in John 20 is sandwiched by descriptions of disciples who hid for fear of the Jews (20:19) and one disciple—Thomas—who was unwilling to believe the resurrection without seeing Jesus (20:24-25). These were, it would seem, not the best men to trust with the responsibility of the Great Commission.

Even the book of Acts reveals a group of men who did not fully comprehend yet. The doubts of the veracity of the resurrection are not apparent, but these same disciples were seemingly more focused on the nationalized kingdom of Israel than on God’s kingdom (Acts 1:6). One can only surmise that their contemplations about their own potential roles in the kingdom distracted them from the work at hand—world evangelization.

Nevertheless, these unworthy and doubting disciples were still the same men that Jesus had called out to be fishers of men (Mark 1:17). They remained the center of his plan to spread the gospel. That sovereign choice was a grace-filled and love-saturated one:

This little group of ordinary men were to go to all the nations of the earth and turn their hearers into disciples of Jesus like themselves! They were having a hard time believing in Him even though they had been with Him for three years and had lived through all the extraordinary events of His ministry and, in particular, of these past few weeks with His death and resurrection. Yet this little group who were so slow to believe were to convert the nations of the earth!³³

The task, however, would not be easy. The cost of doing the commission would be high for these disciples. Persecution would always hang in the air. Rejection, imprisonment, and death would not be uncommon. In fact, this call to make disciples of all nations was “truly a staggering proposition that would verge on the ridiculous were it not for the accompanying authority and promise of the risen Christ, who gives the commission.”³⁴ Jesus knew all of this, though, and he recurrently promised the disciples the power needed to be faithful even unto death.

PRESENCE AND POWER

Hence, the promise of Jesus at the end of Matthew, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20), was much more than a perfunctory closing to a call statement. It was an announcement of victory even in the midst of persecution. In all of these dangerous situations, the disciples would need to trust the bookend truths of Matthew’s gospel: the virgin-born redeemer named “God with us” (1:27) would be with them to the end (28:20). Indeed, “Every disciple who has gone out in the strength of this promise can testify that it has always proven true. From highest mountain to deepest valley, in joy and in sorrow, in life and in death, not one of his disciples has he ever forsaken!”³⁵

The Lukan account is even more arresting. Jesus called his disciples to proclaim the message to all the nations, promised to empower them by sending the Spirit, and then ordered them to wait in Jerusalem until they were “clothed with power from on high” (24:49). No steps would be taken, no decisions would be made, and no ministries would launch out apart from the power of God’s Spirit. With God’s Spirit, though, these same weak disciples would play a role in taking the gospel to the center of the Roman Empire.

The Great Commission account in John’s Gospel begins with Jesus’ announcing “peace be with you” to a group of frightened disciples (20:19). Their having apparently not fully recognized

him, he showed them his pierced hands and side and then announced “peace” to them a second time. This repetition was surely not coincidental. Rather, this double greeting, likely based on the Hebrew tradition of “shalom,” was a reminder that the one who commissioned them knew their heart. He who had purchased peace for them through the cross recognized their fears and anxiety. He was nonetheless about to send them out into the world—but not alone.

Rather, he “breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (20:22). Interpretations of this act differ. Whether the action was a foreshadowing of coming Pentecost or a marker for the conversion of the disciples, it seems clear that the action symbolized empowerment for ministry. Not only does this understanding of John’s Great Commission passage square with the other passages studied in this article, but it also ties the action most clearly to the disciples’s stated ministry (John 20:23). Only in the power of the Spirit could the disciples pronounce forgiveness or judgment on others.

A brief review of this section is in order here. The men mandated first to carry out the Great Commission were often self-centered. They doubted. They were jealous of others at times. They allowed fear to grip them. They fled. And still, Jesus gave them the responsibility to get the gospel to all people. He did so not because he believed they could get the task done; instead, he did it because he knew what the Spirit could do through them. Luke’s second volume would thus undeniably show that the promised Spirit empowered the church as they proclaimed the good news (Acts 1:8; 2:4).³⁹

This truth ought to serve as both encouragement and warning for the contemporary church. We should rejoice that God can use *anyone* in the task of the Great Commission. He who chose the disciples has also chosen us, in spite of who we are. This profound reality reminds us that none of us is given permission to ignore the Great Commission. We have no excuse not to do it if God has

sent his Spirit to get the job done.

The danger is that we will program and strategize the Great Commission until we are relying on our plans and know-how more than on God. Programs are important. Strategy matters. Training is imperative. Plans help guard against an enemy who schemes against us (Eph 6:11). But plans and programs apart from power will not reach the people groups of the world. The breath of God must blow across our efforts if we want to make a Great Commission difference.

CONCLUSION

The numbers are staggering. According to the Joshua Project, 2.8 billion people make up the unreached people groups of the world.³⁶ More than 41 percent of the world’s people groups remain unreached.³⁷ We have already seen that 3,800 people groups are unengaged and unreached. In North America, a 2010 Barna study concluded that approximately 100 million Americans had not attended any church activities within the previous six months.³⁸ Can believers make a genuine difference in this darkness?

We can indeed, for we do this work in God’s power and under God’s promise.⁴⁰ Charles Spurgeon, whose sermon of missionary challenge began this article, is the best one to conclude this article with a resounding word of hope:

I think that no true hearted Christian will ever give up any enterprise which God has laid upon him, because he fears for its ultimate success. “Difficult,” said Napoleon, “is not a French word.” “Doubtful,” is not a Christian word. We are *sure* to succeed; the gospel *must* conquer. It is possible for heaven and earth to pass away, but it is not possible for God’s Word to fail; and therefore it is utterly impossible that any nation, or kindred, or tongue should to the end withstand the attacks of love, and the invasion of the armies of King Jesus.⁴¹

God will, in fact, draw to himself a multitude from

every nation, tribe, people, and tongue (Rev 5:9; 7:9). Armed with that truth, let us press on with the task.

ENDNOTES

¹Charles Spurgeon, "Forward!" in *An All-Round Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2000), 55-56.

²Included in these texts is Mark 16:15. This discussion inevitably raises the question of the original ending of Mark's Gospel. See *Perspectives on the Ending of the Gospel of Mark: Four Views*, (ed. David Allen Black; Nashville: B&H, 2008). The space limitations of this article prohibit tackling this complicated issue sufficiently. For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to include Mark 16:15 because it generally reflects the remaining unquestioned texts.

³John Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 87.

⁴Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in the article are from the New American Standard Version.

⁵Craig Blomberg, *Matthew* (New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 429; Ian Campbell, *Opening up Matthew* (Leominster: Day One, 2008), 176-78.

⁶D. A. Carson, *Matthew 13-28* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 594. Carson argues that the authority granted here was not an increase in authority, but rather an enlargement of the spheres of authority.

⁷A. Scott Moreau, Gary R. Corwin, and Gary B. McGee, *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 44.

⁸Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (ed. L. Arnold Hustad; 2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 260.

⁹Andreas 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), 191, 108.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 192.

¹¹Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlock-*

ing the Bible's Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 60.

¹²F. E. Gaebelien, D. A. Carson, et al., eds., *Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 595.

¹³Wright, *Mission of God*, 35.

¹⁴Robert L. Plummer, "The Great Commission in the New Testament," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9 (2005): 4. Plummer also points out that the command was to teach *all that Jesus commanded*—thus including the Great Commission itself. If the students of the disciples were themselves to do the commission, the argument that the Matthew 28:18-20 was intended for only the disciples has little credibility.

¹⁵S. K. Weber, *Matthew* (Holman New Testament Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 485.

¹⁶Lee Warner, "Southern Baptist Baptisms at Lowest in Decades" [cited 12 July 2011]. Online: <http://www.christianpost.com/news/southern-baptist-baptisms-at-lowest-in-decades-51060/>.

¹⁷Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431.

¹⁸Wright, *Mission of God*, 213.

¹⁹John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 210-11.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 211.

²¹Blomberg, *Matthew*, 432; Hal Freeman, "The Great Commission and the New Testament: An Exegesis of Matthew 28:16-20," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (1997): 18.

²²Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, with Timothy Tenent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 38.

²³Alan James, "Southern Baptists Commit to 'Embrace' the Unengaged, Unreached" [cited 12 July 2011]. Online: <http://www.imb.org/main/news/details.asp?LanguageID=1709&StoryID=9749>.

²⁴Erich Bridges, "NAMB & IMB Partnership to Transcend National, Geographic Borders" [cited 12 July 2011]. Online: <http://www.namb.net/nambblog1.aspx?id=8590116839&blogid=8589939695>.

²⁵See, for example, "Send Cities" [cited 12 July 2011].

Online: <http://www.namb.net/send-cities/>.

²⁶H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *The Pulpit Commentary: St Luke* (vol. 2; Bellingham, WA: Logos), 276.

²⁷William Hendriksen and Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), 361.

²⁸Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 84.

²⁹Plummer, "The Great Commission in the New Testament," 7.

³⁰Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 39.

³¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton: Victor, 1997), 206.

³²Blomberg, *Matthew*, 430.

³³Jerram Barrs, *The Heart of Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 16.

³⁴Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 37.

³⁵F. H. Paschall and H. H. Hobbs, *The Teacher's Bible Commentary: A Concise, Thorough Interpretation of the Entire Bible Designed Especially for Sunday School Teachers* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1972), 615.

³⁶"Global Peoples Summary" [cited 12 July 2011]. Online: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/>.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Barna Group, "Millions of Unchurched Adults Are Christians Hurt by Churches But Can Be Healed of the Pain" [cited 12 July 2011]. Online: <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/362-millions-of-unchurched-adults-are-christians-hurt-by-churches-but-can-be-healed-of-the-pain>.

³⁹cf. Acts 2:17-18; 4:8; 4:31; 5:32; 6:10; 8:29; 8:39; 9:31; 10:19; 10:44; 11:12; 13:2; 13:4.

⁴⁰Plummer notes that the Luke 24:47 Great Commission passage is a prediction best understood as "repentance and forgiveness of sins *will be preached* in his name to all nations." Polhill concludes likewise about the Great Commission call in Acts 1:8, saying, "Jesus promised the disciples two things: power and witness. The future tense here has an imperatival sense: 'you *will* [must] receive power'; 'you *will* be my witnesses.'" In that light Plummer concludes, "In proclaiming the gospel, we know we are busy with a winning and important task." See Plummer, "The

Great Commission in the New Testament," 6; Polhill, *Acts*, 86.

⁴¹Charles Spurgeon, "The Missionaries' Charge and Charta" [cited 12 July 2011]. Online: <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols7-9/chs383.pdf>.