

The Great Commission

Introduction

"The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, **after that He [the Lord Jesus] through the Holy Spirit HAD GIVEN COMMANDMENTS unto the apostles whom he had chosen**" (Acts 1:1-2).

Following His glorious resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ was seen by certain men for forty days (Acts 1:3 and compare 1 Corinthians 15:4-8). He was then taken up into heaven to await the day of His triumphal return when His enemies shall be made His footstool (Psalm 110:1). What was the purpose of this forty-day period between His resurrection and His ascension? Actually the Bible reveals a fourfold purpose:

1. TO CONVINCe MEN OF HIS RESURRECTION

The first purpose of this forty-day period was to convince the disciples of the reality of the resurrection. Their Lord was risen indeed! How did they know this? For forty days Jesus *"showed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs"* (Acts 1:3).

The need for such verification was great. After the resurrection there were many of the disciples who did not believe that Jesus was actually alive. Thomas was not the only doubter. In fact, every gospel account makes mention of those who doubted and disbelieved:

MATTHEW: "And when they saw him, they worshipped him: **BUT SOME DOUBTED**" (28:17).

MARK: "And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, **BELIEVED NOT...AND** they went and told it unto the residue: **NEITHER BELIEVED THEY THEM**. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with **THEIR UNBELIEF** and hardness of heart, **BECAUSE THEY BELIEVED NOT them which had seen him after he was risen**" (16:11,13,14).

LUKE: "And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and **THEY BELIEVED THEM NOT...THEN** he said unto them, **O fools, and SLOW OF HEART TO BELIEVE ALL that the prophets have spoken**" (24:11,25).

JOHN: "But he [Thomas] said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, **I WILL NOT BELIEVE**" (20:25).

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Thomas was but one among many who doubted. The moment Thomas saw the Lord, all doubts vanished! Instantly "Doubting Thomas" was transformed into "Convinced Thomas." Others who saw the risen Saviour were fully persuaded as well. Yes, this forty day period served its purpose well!

Today it is not the privilege of believers to see the risen Lord. We walk by faith and not by sight: "*Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory*" (1 Peter 1:8-9; compare 2 Cor. 5:7). We do not need to see our Lord, but rather we can believe the Word of our God and the testimony of reliable eyewitnesses: "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: *blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed*" (John 20:29). Believers know the reality of the risen Christ because of our *identification with Him*: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but **Christ liveth in me**: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

2. TO COMMUNICATE TRUTH ABOUT HIS KINGDOM.

A second purpose for this forty-day period was to provide the apostles with a comprehensive course on the kingdom, taught by the King Himself. The Lord was "seen of them forty days...speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Israel's promised kingdom was foremost on the minds of the disciples, as indicated by their question, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Their Master and Teacher supplied them with needed information concerning this vast subject of God's reign on earth.

Today this is much confusion on the subject of God's mediatorial kingdom. Many try to equate the church with the kingdom. Many mistakenly claim that the great Old Testament prophecies of the kingdom are today being fulfilled in the church. Some are teaching that Christ is today reigning on the throne of David, thus confusing Christ's present session at the Father's right hand with His future session on the millennial, Davidic throne. Like the disciples of old, God's people today need to be well-schooled in the vast amount of Biblical material in both testaments relating to the kingdom. At the same time we need to make careful distinctions between God's present program with Christ as Head over all things to His Church and God's future program with Christ as King in Jerusalem over the entire world. "Thy kingdom come!" (Luke 11:2).

3. TO CONFIRM THE PROMISE OF HIS PRESENCE.

Before our Lord returned to heaven, He promised His disciples that He would not leave them alone. Though He was received up into heaven, there was a sense in which He was still present

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"working with" His chosen apostles (Mark 16:19-20).

During this forty-day period the Lord Jesus was teaching His disciples an important and practical truth. In a sense He was playing a game of "peekaboo" with His disciples. He would appear and then disappear. They would see Him, but then He would be gone. A week later He would be seen again (John 20:19-26). When parents play "peekaboo" with a very young child, they are teaching the child an important lesson. Even though you cannot always see Mommy and Daddy, they are still there!

Our Lord, by His frequent resurrection appearances, was skillfully instructing His beloved disciples concerning His abiding presence. They were then better prepared to understand His promise, "Lo, I am with you always [though you will not see Me], even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Their Lord would not leave them, but He would come in the Person of the Holy Spirit to be present with them forever: "And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever; Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth Him not, neither knoweth Him: but ye know Him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you. I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you" (John 14:16-18).

Today our hearts should be greatly encouraged to know that the One who is at the right hand of the Father is the same One who gave us the comforting promise: "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb. 13:5).

4. TO COMMAND HIS CHOSEN APOSTLES.

During the forty day period immediately following the resurrection, the Lord Jesus gave His marching orders to His faithful disciples. Luke records that before Christ was taken up to heaven He gave "commandments unto the apostles whom He had chosen" (Acts 1:2). These solemn commandments comprise what is generally known as "the Great Commission."

On the night before He was crucified, Christ made an amazing statement to the men who had sat under His teaching ministry for more than three years: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). They were certainly not ready for the Great Commission at this point! If the Lord had commanded them to "go into all the world and preach the gospel" they would have been completely overwhelmed and unprepared. At this point in history they did not even have a gospel to preach! They failed at this point to understand even the basic facts of the Lord's death and resurrection. It was not the time to command them to go forth and preach Christ crucified. They had to live through these events and only later would they begin to learn the significance of the cross and the empty tomb.

At a later time the disciples were more prepared to "bear" what their risen Saviour would say to them. As Christ opened the Scriptures, they began to understand the absolute necessity of His death and resurrection (Luke 24:45-46). They soon realized that it was also their privilege and responsibility to make known this message to others and to bear witness to their living Lord (Luke 24:47-48).

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The Lord Jesus still had many more things to say to His disciples, and this vital information would come at a later time: "when He, the Spirit of truth is come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). This promise was fulfilled by the Spirit through the ministry of the New Testament apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20; 3:5) and this "added revelation" eventually became recorded in the form of the completed New Testament Scriptures.

The Lord knew, however, that there were certain basic commands which must be communicated directly to His apostles even before the coming of the Spirit and the inauguration of God's new program, the church. These "marching orders" from the risen Saviour provided the disciples with a clear understanding of what God was going to do through them. It was their task to *continue* that glorious work ("doing and teaching") which their ascended Lord had so perfectly begun (Acts 1:1-2).

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In the Great Commission, the Lord Jesus Christ gave His farewell address, His parting words, His final instructions to the men who would soon become the first members of His church. Of course, further instructions would also come from heaven by the Spirit of God to the churches in what we now know of as the New Testament epistles. What really is the mission of the church today? What is our God-given task and responsibility? Why does the church of Jesus Christ exist on earth? What exactly has our sovereign Lord and Head told us to do? These crucial questions can only be answered by an objective and diligent study of the Great Commission passages.

Such a study is urgent in view of the many false ideas about what the Great Commission really is. For example, the Great Commission according to the liberal churches reads somewhat as follows:

Go into all the world and improve society and love your neighbor by promoting urban development, feeding the poor and caring for the sick and needy, etc.

To some the Great Commission does not even apply to believers living today:

Do not go into all the world because this command is not for us today. The Great Commission was never intended for the church.

Others think our mission is to try to change the world and reform society by becoming politically active, by trying to close down abortion centers, by engaging in various forms of social activism, etc.

The Great Commission according to many evangelicals and fundamentalists is this:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel and proclaim the message of salvation and win souls for Christ.

Is this the Great Commission of our Lord, or is there much more involved? What exactly did our Lord tell us to do?

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All four of the gospel writers contribute significantly to our understanding of what the Great Commission really entails. They each accurately record the words and commands of Christ which were given after His resurrection and before His return to heaven. These important passages may be listed as follows:

- 1) The Great Commission According to Matthew:
Matthew 28:16-20
- 2) The Great Commission According to Mark
Mark 16:14-20
- 3) The Great Commission According to Luke
Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:1-8
- 4) The Great Commission According to John
John 20:19-23 (and compare John 17:18)

At a later time, the Apostle Paul received further revelation from the Lord (Ephesians 3:3-4) by which He understood God's glorious purpose and program among the Gentiles (Ephesians 3:8-9). This new truth was in perfect harmony with Christ's original post-resurrection commands to His apostles. But the Lord, through Paul, adorned the simplicity the Lord's earlier Commission with a comprehensive revelation of the nature of the church and the mission of the church in the outworking of God's program for this present age. This truth, which thrilled the heart of the Apostle Paul, is perhaps best summarized in the central and climactic passage in his first letter to Timothy. Hence we have what we might call...

- 5) The Great Commission According to Paul
1 Timothy 3:14-16

May the Lord open the eyes of our understanding so that we may know exactly why the Lord Jesus has commissioned us and sent us into the world (John 17:18) and what He has told us to do as HIS WITNESSES. May God then enable us by His grace to be obedient to our Lord's authoritative commands! May we know the fullness of His Spirit. May we know the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. May we know the LIFE of the indwelling Christ. May we have the God-given burden for lost men and women, boys and girls. May we see the world through the eyes of our compassionate Saviour. May we never be ashamed of the gospel!

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"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

This passage is the basis of the following poem or song. May it be the heart-cry of each and every child of God:

May I Never Be Ashamed!

- 1) When I was yet a sinner, Jesus died for me.
He purchased my redemption when He hung there on that tree.
I'll always be so thankful to my God who loved me so.
May I never be ashamed of my Saviour, in His power and strength I will go.

- 2) Many talk about Jesus, His life and ministry.
They love to think of His sermons, a learned Teacher was He.
But I go back to the cross, where for me my Saviour died!
May I never be ashamed of Calvary, and my Redeemer crucified.

- 3) Jesus came to seek and save, lost sinners to reclaim.
Come to Him in simple faith, receive Him, believe in His Name.
Then you can stand together with the saints in one accord.
You will never be ashamed that you trusted Him as your Saviour, King and Lord.

Chorus:

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!
Sing Hallelujah! Praise His Name!
Let us shout the Saviour's story,
Let every saint His message proclaim.
It is the power of God unto salvation to all who will believe.
May I never be ashamed of the gospel: CHRIST CRUCIFIED FOR ME!