



The Lost Foundations - The Commission is Great

Introduction

Imagine you are a draftsman, and an aspiring architect. An established and highly respected architect asks you to join his team. He has seen your work and would like to train you to take over a large division of his firm.

Without hesitation, you drop what you are doing and follow him; for this is your heart's desire.

Time goes by. You spend three years with your new mentor, being made into the architect that he desires you to be. Before you know it, the day arrives for your promotion.

With the authority vested in him as owner and master architect, your mentor commissions you to carry on his good work. He surprises you by promising you and your new peers that your work will be greater than anything he has ever done.

What do you do next? Do you go back to being a draftsman? Do you limit yourself to drawing preliminary or conceptual plans? Do you start creating paintings of buildings?

Do you do anything but the work he has trained, and commissioned, you to do? Being a draftsman is easier; and painting buildings may be a relaxing hobby. But, do you settle for less because it's easier or less stressful?

To some, these questions will seem silly; even a waste of time. I wish they were. I wish they were not relevant to our current situation.

I wish the Western church was not settling for less than great. I wish we knew what it meant to be fishers of men; to be about the commission we have been given by the Lord.

And Jesus came 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. Matthew 28:18-20

A recent search for "making disciples", on ChristianBook.com, returned a list of 615 books. Think about that. If you read one of these books a week, it would take you almost 12 years to complete your research. At the end of those twelve years, you would likely discover that twenty or thirty more had been written... and you might decide to write one yourself.

Clearly, we do not lack for resources when it comes to the Great Commission. So what's gone wrong? Why is it taking so long to complete the primary task that Jesus Christ gave to us – over 2000 years ago?

Looking back on what we have discovered to this point, here are some possibilities:

1. **Whose Story is It?** Perhaps we have lost sight of God's purpose in Jesus' commission; that making the story about us has turned it into something less than great.
2. **The Fullness of the Gospel.** Or, perhaps we have shrunk the good news for convenience sake, only to lose our vision for its full blessing.
3. **Counting the Cost... First.** As they say, "You get what you pay for." It is understandable that people would measure the greatness of their assignment by the investment required of them.

Of course, the reasons for our failure are not as important as our making the necessary adjustments in our understanding, belief and commitment going forward. We will start with the most obvious misunderstanding.

Being “Fishers of Men” is Not “Evangelism”

Then He said to them, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Matthew 4:19

There is something about the way we think about the Great Commission that has made it less than great. This is the proverbial “elephant in the room”; and before we move on to the greatness of the Commission, we must deal with this misunderstanding.

Regrettably, in the relatively recent past, being a fisher of men has become the same as “being an evangelist”. This is wrong on multiple levels, the least of which is the definition of terms.

Most everyone knows that Jesus said, “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men.” They just don’t understand what that means. They have not considered (or were not taught) that Jesus was calling them to be made for the very thing He would commission them to do.

The one who “preaches the gospel” and/or “bears good news” (Strong’s and Thayer’s definitions for evangelist) is more akin to throwing out the net. Even “heralding salvation through Christ” (also Thayer’s) sounds something more like calling the fish to come into the boat.

Think about it. Is fishing just a matter of throwing out a net? What about pulling it in? And, what do you do with the fish once you get them in the boat? Are they just left to lay there and die?

I am not suggesting we fry up a bunch of new converts. The simple point is this: There is more to do.

Having already discussed the cost of following Jesus we will not go there, except to say that following Jesus is more than preaching the gospel. You are not a disciple if you are not making them yourself. Conversely, you cannot make disciples if you are not being made yourself.

This relationship between Jesus, the disciple maker He is using, and the one who is being made is a significant part of the greatness of the Great Commission.

You may be asking yourself: How did we get to this point? Admittedly, I am no expert in the history of the Western church. However, I do have a couple of thoughts on the subject – for your consideration.

From my perspective, two forces met to create this phenomenon. The first was the crusade movement, where the number of commitment cards became the measure of success. This carried over into the mega-church movement of the late 21st Century.

Just ask yourself, what is the first (or second) question most often asked about a church? It is always some form of “how big”, right? And isn’t “how big” always the number of members?

Now, it is important to point out that, in and of themselves, crusades and mega-churches are not bad things to have. It is the focus on counting that took us sideways; particularly when we began making it “easier” to follow Jesus Christ – to be a disciple. Somewhere in the mix, the necessity for making disciples took a back seat.

Secondly, we are failing in Christ’s Commission because we are going about our assignment in a most unproductive way. It is by grace that we are given a part in God’s story. To play a part, we must see His plan from His perspective; and realize that He has His own way for getting things done. His ways, though sometimes uncomfortable, are the best ways.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.” Notice that he did not say “Christianity without evangelism...” Becoming disciple makers is the way we enter into the work God is doing to redeem the world to Himself.

The meaning of words is important; and disciple is an important word. It bears repeating: Being a disciple is more than accepting the truth of Scripture. It is more than accepting Jesus as our Savior. Being a disciple is a lifelong process of being made as a follower of the Master.

God has a particular way for being and making disciples. His Son demonstrated that way during the three-plus years of His ministry.

First, He Showed Us How

Have you ever considered that Jesus could have died, been buried and rose again in less than a week? That is all the time it would have taken for Him to accomplish what many believe to be His only mission. So why was He about the Father’s business for more than three years?

It is simple, and obvious: The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus were not His only mission.

Jesus Christ also came to show His disciples how we should live in the kingdom of God. Having completed that work, He commissioned them to do the same:

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” John 20:21

Notice that Jesus was sent by the Father. This may be news to some. It may also be surprising that we are sent as the Father sent Him.

Recognizing the deeper meaning of this, A. W. Tozer said, “Only a disciple can make a disciple.” Tozer understood – as we must – that Jesus was not only the first disciple maker...

Jesus was also the first real disciple!

Let that sink in for a minute. As the first real disciple, Jesus is the One we can and should look to as our example. He was a disciple – and He made disciples – God’s way.

We will explore God’s way for making disciple later. For now, consider this: Jesus’ commission was so great that He spent more than three years – having made Himself of no reputation (empty, void, and deprived of force) – to teach, demonstrate and birth the process that would eventually produce His church.

He will surely finish the work He has begun; and the finished product will surely be great. This is His hopeful expectation.

His Expectations are for Great Things

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Jesus is expecting great things from His followers. In fact, it would be impossible to over-estimate the potential greatness of the Church Age.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father. John 14:12

As He approached the end of His ministry here on Earth, Jesus began saying some incredibly audacious things. Here, he makes a very straight forward declaration. Regrettably, many commentators and teachers have reduced the greatness of this saying with humanistic explanations.

Perhaps He meant exactly what He said.

If John 14:12 was all that Jesus had to say about His great expectations, we could understand a bit of skepticism. But, this is simply not the case. In fact, it is His final instructions (i.e., The Great Commission) that reveal the great hopes He had for those that would choose to follow Him.

The Fullness of the Great Commission

Did you know that Jesus' commission is spread across all four gospels; and included in the book of Acts? There is certainly more here than most have considered. Before digging in, let me make a few suggestions:

1. Be careful not to explain away the greatness of His commission.
2. Remember that these were His final words before His ascension; the last things He wanted them to hear. Last words are many times the most important.
3. Each word, phrase and concept may contain meaning beyond your current understanding. Search out the matter, as the Lord leads you.
4. Reckon each truth you find to be truth for you – truth that will make you a disciple; and truth that will make you free to walk fully into this great adventure.

As you read each account of Jesus' final commission, you will find particular aspects of its greatness. You will also discover some related matters. Keep in mind that the relationships are important to our understanding, belief and commitment to the Commission's greatness.

The Greatness of the Commissioner

And Jesus came 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. Matthew 28:18-20

The commission is first of all great because the Commissioner has been given all authority; and all means all. All also means all in regards to the nations. Not one is to be left out. Now that is a great assignment.

While we are here, recognize the importance of "baptizing in the name of..." and "teaching them to observe". As we have previously discovered, "in the name of" means: "with someone else's purpose and authority". The Commission is great because it is about Him.

Furthermore, Jesus' expects us to do more than "teach" His commands. We are to teach others to observe His commands. From Vine's Dictionary, observe means to "to watch over, preserve" – a word very close to "steward". This is a much greater responsibility than teaching; a responsibility for every follower of Christ (not just teachers).

The Great Signs

"And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. Mark 16:17-20

Signs will follow those who believe. Catch this: The signs are not reserved for those who proclaim the good news (i.e., evangelists). They are for every believer!

These signs are supernatural in both the physical and spiritual realms. Lastly, though it was His followers that went out and preached, it was “the Lord working with them” to confirm the word of God. The Commission is supernaturally great.

The Greatness of His Story

Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.” Luke 24:44-49

The Commission is an extension of God’s greater story; for an understanding of the Old Testament is important – particularly as it relates to Christ. Repentance and the remission of sins are an important part of the message; as is the Promise of the Father. As the Promised One, the Holy Spirit would empower them to continue God’s great story.

Great Peace and Authority

So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” John 20:21-23

The Commission is the continuation of Jesus’ great mission; and it comes with great peace – the peace of God that transcends all understanding. Jesus sends His disciples as the Father sent Him. The Holy Spirit – our Comforter – must be received. Incredibly, disciples are given the authority to forgive and retain sins. This speaks both to our identity as disciples of Jesus Christ and to our Heavenly Father’s trust in His children.

Great Witnessing Power

And being assembled together with them, He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the Promise of the Father, “which,” He said, “you have heard from Me; for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.” Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:4-8

The Commission comes with great power. There is not only a baptism in water, but one in the Holy Spirit. This baptism – “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” – is the power for bearing witness to Jesus Christ, even to the ends of the earth. “Bearing witness” is more than preaching or testifying. It is, for example, being the light of the world – so that they will see your good works, and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Later in Acts, we begin to see the great manifestations of Jesus Christ’s commission.

And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. Acts 4:33

So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things. Acts 5:11

Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith. Acts 6:7

Great power and grace; great fear and multiplication of the number of disciples – it was truly a great time in the life of the church.

These passages should give great encouragement and hope to every follower of Jesus Christ. If we will only make disciples God's way, the glory and power of God will be manifest in our families, fellowships and communities. The Great Commission will be great in the greatest way possible.

Conclusion

The Great Commission is no less great because we have lost sight of its greatness. Its greatness is not in the eye of the beholder. It will always be great to, and for, God.

What has been lost, has been our loss. Our failure to recognize the greatness of the Great Commission has left us on the sidelines, watching others enjoy the blessings of God toward those who hear, believe and obey Christ's command to go and make disciples...

Making disciples has been called the Great Commission for a reason. It is filled with the greatness of the God's purpose, plan and power for ministry. Through it, God's children involve themselves in the greatness of God's story. Out of it, His way, truth and life greatly impact the world – for His great glory, name and kingdom.

If we really believe that Jesus has been given ALL authority; and we really believe that He has commissioned us to make disciples; why would I do anything else; or anything less?

Working it Out

Are you wondering how you are going to work the Great Commission into your already busy schedule? Do you see it as another work activity – something additional? If so, then I have some extra encouragement for you.

The Great Commission is not about additionality (yes, I made that up). It is about intentionality. I recently heard Caesar Kalinowski describe how we, as followers of Christ, can make disciples in the normal rhythms of our lives. The Youtube video of this is easy to find. In it, Caesar lists six areas of life where disciple making can be intentional, and not additional.

1. Know the Story – Everyone has a story; and we like to share them. Can you express your story in the context of God's story? Story telling is a normal rhythm of life. It is easier than you think.
2. Listening – Most of us spend too much time talking; or preparing to talk. The children of God have been given ears to hear. We should exercise them more; both with God, and with those in our spheres of influence.
3. Celebrating – Think about all the holidays that are just coming around; and birthdays (everybody you know has one); and anniversaries; etc. We need to join those celebrations and be the bringers of the better wine. Throw the best parties. The church should be the most celebratory people on the planet.
4. Eating – Most of us are already eating 21 times a week. What if you were to have three meals a week with people you are trying to disciple? Be intentional in your interaction with those you meet when you are eating out.
5. Blessing – Ask the spirit to reveal to you three people that you could bless intentionally each week through words, actions, or gifts. Imagine a group of people in your neighborhood, like ten or twelve, all blessing three people a week. You think that neighborhood would notice?

6. Creating – This is the idea of resting in Christ's completed work; and then out of that, we create beauty as we work and create value for others – not to earn anything from God, but to magnify Him in the work we do.

If you are a Leader in the Workplace, then you are called to make disciples. To whom much is given, much is expected. You are expected to understand your commission and carry it out to the best of your ability. Most of the work will be His, for He will get the glory. Our responsibility is to choose and passionately pursue His way, His truth, and His life; and to share what we have with others.

Assignment

1. Review your notes and the Scripture passages from this week's module. Share the ones that are most meaningful to someone in your spheres of influence.
2. How does this understanding of "disciple" change your perspective of the relationship you have with Jesus Christ? How does this impact the disciple making God is doing in you? How does this impact the disciple making God is doing through you?
3. Identify the three to twelve people that God has placed in your spheres of influence for you to be more intentional about making into disciples of Jesus Christ.

Recommended Reading

The following are some of my favorite books on this subject. Most can be found at your local Christian book store, or at one of the many online distributors.

True Discipleship; William MacDonald

The Map Maker; Rob Streetman (I was just the pen)

Two Real-life Examples

Business Owner example (from evangelist to disciple maker)

Youth Pastor example (from teacher to disciple maker)