

THE GREAT COMMISSION

Pastor Jim Park, Ph.D.

During the last two centuries, the Protestant missionary enterprise has probably appealed to Matthew's 'Great Commission' more than any other text in order to inspire and shape its outreach to people across the globe. Countless mission conferences and speakers have used all or part of the Great Commission in slogan, song and word to propel the church forward into distant mission lands.

This modern use of the Great Commission seems in part to reflect why the gospel of Matthew was originally written. Although it is difficult to understand the total historical environment which guided Matthew to write his gospel, it is generally accepted that "Matthew wrote as a Jew to a predominantly Jewish Christian community" (Bosch 1997:55). Bosch goes on to say that, "the entire purpose of his writing was to nudge his community toward a missionary involvement with its environment" (1997:55).

While a qualification of Matthew's purpose for writing his gospel might be in order, there is no doubt that the construction of the gospel and the phrasing of the Great Commission were meant to inspire God's church to become involved in missionary work from apostolic times to the final consummation.

While the Great Commission has been in the past one of the most cited missionary texts in the Bible, "the appeal to the 'Great Commission' usually took no account of the fact that this pericope cannot be properly understood in isolation from the gospel of Matthew as a whole" (Bosch 1997:55).

Blauw echoes and broadens the concern of Bosch of isolating the Great Commission from the entire Bible when he states: "Mission was formerly based a little too one-sidedly and (even) almost exclusively on this 'great commission.' But the fault lay not in the fact that mission was based on this declaration, but in the fact that Matt. 29:18-20 was isolated from the whole of the Biblical witness" (1962:85-86).

Perhaps since the Great Commission is one of the richest pericope's of the Bible, the church did not feel a need to go beyond the precious ore that was enfolded within its borders. Could it be that the richness of the verses were not meant to stop the reader but rather were meant to propel the church beyond these headwaters to the verdant valleys which are fed by the words, "go," "make disciples" "baptize," and "teach"?

If we are to deepen our understanding of these wonderful verses then: "It is inadmissible to lift these words out of Matthew's gospel, as it were, allow them a life of their own, and understand them without any reference to the context in which they first appeared (Bosch 1997:57). The next two sections will attempt to place the Great Commission in the context of the gospel of Matthew and the rest of Scripture.

The Great Commission in Matthew

In the above section it was briefly noted that the Great Commission has all too often been divorced from the rest of the gospel of Matthew. The Great Commission itself is part of a larger whole which begins with the two contrasting interactions with Pilate concerning the burial of Jesus by Joseph on the Preparation Day (27:55-61) and the Pharisees on the Sabbath (27:62-66).

The parallels between the two groups are again set forth in the resurrection of Jesus. In 28:1-10 the women are instructed first by the angels and then by Jesus to go and give the disciples the true report about the resurrection. In 28:11 the Pharisees use bribery to influence the guards to go and spread a false report of the resurrection.

The Great Commission itself is linked in two very important ways to these preceding verses by the transition verse in 28:16. While most of the disciples positively respond to the report of the women by going to the mountain in Galilee in order to receive the great commission from Jesus, some of the disciples doubted.

Matthew without question wants to link these doubting disciples to the attempts by the Pharisees (through their disciples the soldiers) to discredit the resurrection which in turn would destroy the very foundation of the Great Commission itself. Whereas the gospel of John uses the story of Thomas to reflect the struggles of present and future communities of faith to believe in the resurrection, Matthew takes the Pharisees commissioning of the soldiers to spread a false report as the context in which the church must operate in the present and in the future.

That is to say, as a result of the resurrection of Jesus a true and a false report has been and will continue to be given. Whereas in Matthew's day the fact of the resurrection might have been clouded by gnosticism, the secularism and higher critical theories have cast doubt on the resurrection and by extension on the Great Commission itself. Table one gives a summation of the immediate context.

THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION

Time	Pharisees/Chief Priests	Women/Disciples
Friday The Preparation Day	The Pharisees came from Jerusalem The Pharisees go to Pilate and ask for the death of Jesus.	The women came from Galilee. Joseph goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus.
Sabbath	The Pharisees go to Pilate and ask that the body of Jesus be secured by a guard.	The women rest by faith on the Sabbath as Jesus sleeps in the grave.
Sunday The First Day of the Week	The Pharisees instruct the guards to go and spread a false report of the resurrection.	Jesus instructs the women to go and tell the disciples about the true report of the resurrection.
Forty Days Later and Beyond	The story of a false resurrection widely spread among the Jews "to this day." Some doubt Jesus.	The story of the true resurrection is to spread to all the world "to the very end of the age."

Within this framework, Chuck Van Engen has recognized that the Great Commission is actually part of three commissions within the final verses of Matthew. His findings are summarized in the adapted table below.

THE THREE COMMISSIONS
(Adapted from Van Engen 1996:117)

Aspect	To the Women	To the Guards	To the Disciples
Commission	Go and Tell the Good News About the Resurrection	Go and Tell a Lie About the Resurrection	Go and Make Disciples of all Nations
Authority	Angels The Risen Lord	The Jewish Leaders	The Universal Rule of Jesus
Motivation	Fear and Joy	Greed and Money	The Transferred Apostolate
Message	He is Risen	He is Dead	His is Alive He is Lord
Goal	Send Disciples to Galilee	Maintain Control	Send Disciples to the World
Result	Encounter in Galilee	Lie was Told	Disciples Were Made (Acts)
Promise	You Will see Jesus	We Will Cover You	I Will be With You to the End of the Earth.”

One of the primary interpreting principles of hermeneutics is to understand the part in terms of the whole and the whole in term of the part. This “hermeneutical circle” in Matthew must then spiral between “the part” (the Great Commission along with its immediate context) and “the whole” (the rest of the gospel and Scripture).

This part/whole relationship has been noted by scholars today who, “agree that the entire gospel points to these final verses: all the threads woven into the fabric of Matthew, from chapter 1 onward, draw together here” (Bosch 1997:57).

That is to say, if we are to discover the meaning of the major themes in the Great Commission, then we must understand how these seminal thoughts are defined, developed and synthesized within the book of Matthew. Conversely, the commission itself can also serve “as a lens through which Matthew’s understanding of the disciples’ mission may be viewed” (Harvey 1998:129). With this relationship between the commission and the gospel in mind, what then is the primary focus of the Book of Matthew? If the Great Commission deals primarily with mission, then can it be said that the book of Matthew is “essentially a missionary text” (Bosch 1997:57)?

There seems to be little doubt that the church’s and disciple’s work is clearly a major theme in both the ending commission and the entire gospel. John R. W. Stott makes a most insightful statement when he says: “the Gospel of Matthew begins with the coming of Gentile strangers to worship the infant Christ; it concludes with the sending out of believers to win the Gentile world” (Stott: 1968:11).

At the beginning of the gospel of Matthew, God uses Magi from the east who are guided by a star (2:7), Jewish teachers of the law (2:4-6) and a dream (2:12) in order to find the Messiah and escape from Herod. In contrast, at the end of the gospel of Matthew, the Lord not only uses supernatural signs (28:2, an earthquake) and messages (28:5, an angel), but faithful women who act as the Risen Lord’s commissioned agents to go and tell His disciples of His resurrection.

Therefore the fruit of Jesus’ ministry is evidenced by the presence of disciplined men and women who are now privileged and empowered to carry out the work of angels to spread the good news of the Messiah King. Between the story of the Magi

and the Great Commission are teachings and stories which dramatically tell just how the Lord gathered and trained His disciples.

In analyzing the message of Matthew from the literary/narrative school, Dorothy Wilkins has concluded:

The disciples obviously knew the process through which Jesus had taken them, and what he had taught them, but if the open-ended nature of the commission was to retain its force (ews thssunteleias aiwnos) then a manual on discipleship was needed for other maqhtai to carryout the mandate. Placed at this climactic conclusion to his gospel, the mandate could very well be an indication of a central purpose in Matthew's Tendenz (Wilkins 1988:162).

The next section will explore how the Great Commission relates to the rest of Scripture.

The Great Commission in Scripture

In the early 1960s Johannes Blauw wrote a book entitled, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, which was commissioned by the World Council of Churches to survey and appraise the recent work in Biblical theology about the nature and necessity of the Church's mission to the world. He begins his survey by saying: "When the question of the basis and meaning of the mission of the Church to all the nations is raised, the Old Testament can neither be by-passed no referred to merely by way of introduction" (1962:15).

He comments that the older literature on the Biblical theology of mission in the Old Testament is "constantly disappointing"(Blauw 1962:15). In an obvious critique of the historicist school Blauw insightfully observes, "For years Old Testament criticism was, with few exceptions, more impressed by the dependence of the Old Testament on its environment than by its special vocation in the midst of this environment" (Blauw 1962:15).

Blauw's thesis is that the basic message of the Old Testament is universal and not missionary in nature. God's universal concern is demonstrated by the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis where the Lord deals with the nations as a whole in the stories of the flood and the Tower of Babel.

Within this context of God's concern of all people, He establishes a universal covenant with Abraham by promising him that "in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This blessing occurs within the story of God's ongoing care for the nations who have rebelled against Him.

Here it becomes clear that the whole history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God's dealings with the nations, and that therefore the history of Israel is only to be understood from the unsolved problem of the relation of God to the nations (Blauw 1962:19).

In this context of God's universal concern for the nations, "the election of Israel is a matter of divine initiative which has as its goal the recognition of God by all nations over the whole world. The way to this goal is the theocracy of Israel; the means is Israel's separation from the other peoples." (Blauw 1962:24).

However, this separation of Israel to become the People of God was never meant to isolate but rather to foster the centripetal movement of the nations to God's people, city and sanctuary. It is not until the Great Commission of Matt. 28:18-20 that the centrifugal aspect of God's universal concern for the nations is expressed in a command to reach the nations: "For it cannot be denied that here, and for the first time, the commission is given to go out among the nations" (Blauw 1962:86).

The Great Commission emphasizes the universal lordship of the Risen Christ by using the word "all" four times. Jesus has been given all authority, the disciples are to do all He has commanded, they are to go out to all the nations and He would be with them always, (Greek: all the days). "The proclamation of the Gospel is thus the proclamation of the Lordship of Christ among the nations" (Blauw 1962:84).

The Great Commission expresses the continuity of God’s universal concern which began in the Book of Genesis. It also signals a clear methodological break between the centripetal motion inherent in the gathering of the nations to Israel and the centrifugal motion of the disciples being scattered to make disciples of the nations. A further link between the Great Commission and the Old Testament is found in the covenantal formula. M.G. Kline states:

“The incorporation of disciples into the jurisdiction of the New Covenant by baptismal confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is in clear continuity with the tradition of the initiatory oath of allegiance found in Old Testament covenantal engagements (and their extra-biblical counterparts) (1968:80).

Grounded in the ancient Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties, the three elements of preamble, demand and promise were basic to both the universal covenants and the ones given to Israel. A table illustrating this basic form is given below:

GOD’S COVENANTS IN THE BIBLE
(Adapted from De Ridder 1979:178)

	Universal Covenant	Israel’s Covenant	Universal Covenant
	Genesis 12	Genesis 17	Matthew 28
Preamble	The LORD (Yahweh) said	I am God Almighty	All power has been given to me in heaven and earth.
Demand	Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house . . . (Go) to the land that I will show you.	Walk before me and be blameless.	When you go, make disciples of all nations . . . baptizing . . . teaching all that I have commanded you.

Promise	I will make you a great nation . . . I will bless you . . . I will make your name great. . . . I will bless/curse those who bless/curse you.	I will establish my covenant . . . to be a God to you and to your descendants . . . I will give to you the land of your sojournings.	I am with you always, to the end of the age.
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In the New Testament, Matthew’s Great Commission can be compared to the other commissions found in the gospels and the Book of Acts. While they may reflect the same basic form they have different emphasis. “Blauw has pointed out that in all the Gospels the command of Christ is concerned with authority: Matthew emphasizes royal authority(28:18-20), Mark, liberating authority (16:15-18), Luke, forgiving authority (28:44-53); John emphasizes the continuity between Jesus and those sent (20:21)” (De Ridder 1975:183).

THE NEW TESTAMENT COMMISSIONS

(Adapted from Harvey 1998:46)

	Mt.28:18-20	Mk. 16:15-18	Lk. 24:46-49	Jn. 20:21-23	Acts 1:4-8
Authority	all authority	-----	it is written	as the Father sent me	Father . . . by his authority
Activity	make disciples	preach the gospel	repentance /be proclaimed	forgive/ retain sins	be my witnesses
Scope	all the nations	all creation	all the nations	any	remotest part of the earth

Means	baptizing teaching	be baptized	-----	-----	-----
Reassurance	with you always	signs will accompany	promise of my Father	receive the Holy Spirit	baptized with the Holy Spirit

A Summary Conclusion

More than any other text in the Bible, Matthew's 'Great Commission' has been used by the Protestant missionary movement to inspire and shape its outreach to people across the globe. This important text has often been lifted out of its context and has been subject to either limited or wrong understandings.

The Great Commission is linked to its immediate context through the introductory verse in 28:16. While the disciples positively respond to the report of the women by going to the mountain in Galilee in order to receive the great commission from Jesus, some of the disciples doubted as a result of the soldiers commission. Hence Matt. 28 contains not one, but three commissions from the women, the guards and the final one to the disciples.

In connection with the rest of Matthew, the gospel is constructed in order to give meaning to the major terms found in the commission itself through the stories and teachings which precedes it. In order to interpret the commission (the part) it must be understood in light of Matthew's gospel (the whole) and vice-a-versa.

The whole not only includes Matthew but also the rest of the New Testament and the Old Testament as well. Blauw has shown that God's universal concern for the nations is shown by both the covenants and the Great Commission. They all contain the same three elements of preamble, demand and promise. Lastly, while the other commissions in the New Testament share some common elements with Matt. 28:16-20, they also give different emphasis dependent on the overall aim of the book.