

The GREAT Commission

A Well-Known Passage of Scripture defines for us what Christ Expects His Faithful Disciples to Continually be Doing while Awaiting His Return. Have WE in any way Diminished its Scope in the Modern Era?

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An often quoted passage, spoken by Christ directly to His Disciples during the few days prior to His ascension to Heaven, is found in Matthew 28 and Mark 16. These passages are commonly regarded as defining “the Great Commission”. Matthew has, beginning in verse 18: *“And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. 19: Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: 20: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”*

Mark’s version of the same instruction, beginning in verse 15 is: *“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. 16: He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. 17: And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall **they** cast out devils; **they** shall speak with new tongues; 18: **They** shall take up serpents; and if **they** drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; **they** shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. 19: So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. 20: And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.”*

From this clear instruction, God’s Church has largely taken its cue. In the modern era the Church’s mission has been generally built around doing what this particular mandate calls for, seeing in it **two** major aspects: 1) preaching the Gospel to the world and 2) educating those who respond with intent of themselves becoming disciples. It seems, then, that there’s a general compliance with the instruction. So, does it warrant another look?

These Signs Shall Follow

It’s one thing to preach the Gospel to all the world. It’s another to have people respond to the message. But perhaps the overlooked aspect of this situation is the predicted and intended outcome of implementing the Commission.

Mark’s rendition of what was said that day is a little more specific than Matthew’s. He writes that there would be some very obvious and noteworthy manifestations of the power of God evident in those who not only respond, but who do so with a high degree of enthusiasm. He wrote: *“In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.* Our question is, who is the ‘they’? Obviously, it isn’t everyone, but it does reflect on the responders to the apostles’ message, not just the apostles themselves! Christ doesn’t say I will give **you** the power to cast out demons and heal the sick in order to dazzle and help convince the hearers that you speak with the authority of God. He appears to be saying that the responders will themselves exhibit these manifestations also. Is that correct? And if so, what does that tell us?

Does Matthew Offer a Clue?

In Matthew’s account, there’s a subtle variation, but when we compare it to the above, it may help us answer a question. He also alludes to the two aspects of the Commission, preaching to the world, but also teaching the responders. He says the Church is to be: *“Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you:”* We usually take that to mean we should be teaching them to keep the Commandments, which is logical. But, looking at the statement a little more

analytically, we should also consider that one of the things He Commanded them was to ‘go into all the world and preach the Gospel!’ Is that one of the things we are to teach them to do? IF this is the case, it would then follow that there is a **third** aspect to the Great Commission, that we may tacitly acknowledge, but perhaps not openly advocate to the degree we should. That it’s not just a static teacher / student situation, but that the students are to themselves become teachers!

Why Ask THIS Question?

It is the nature of our organizational configuration, and for that matter, has been, of the churches of most all of Christianity, or what is called that, that for centuries we’ve seen the structure of things being: ministry and laity. There is for the most part a clear line of distinction. The ministry has their area of expertise and the laity has their boundaries set for them, especially as it might involve intruding into any ‘ministerial areas’. This works well insofar as maintaining organizational structure, but to the degree it is imposed, there is risk of creating what might be seen as a ‘degenerative condition’.

Our smaller, tightly controlled, one-man organizations are especially vulnerable to this condition. Because, whenever there are competent, well trained members among the ‘laity’, there’s always the chance that one will ‘break out’ and actually DO something on his own, causing no end of anxiety on the part of the ‘one man’ who sees all such situations as detrimental to his own ‘control’, his prestige and a challenge to his exclusive ‘authority sphere’.

But, this raises the question of the second aspect of the Commission. If it were complied with, as fully as Christ intended, wouldn’t the majority of members eventually become trained to the degree that they also could step-up-to-the-plate, so to speak, and do likewise as their appropriately esteemed teachers?

If we are to allow that there IS a ‘third aspect’ of the Commission, that the responders are to be trained to the point that they can with competence do the same as their original evangelizers from whom they heard the Word, then, what can we say

for the condition in the Church which actively discourages such development?

Teach THEM to do What I Taught You to Do.

An above paragraph referred to a ‘degenerative condition’. A condition caused and aggravated by what might be referred to in the business world as a ‘glass ceiling’. It may not be entirely inappropriate to apply such a term in a religious organization, because many of them are organized along the lines of a corporation. Our question is, Did God create or authorize any glass ceiling in His Church? The concept of a ‘third aspect’ of the Great Commission would pose serious challenge to the legitimacy of there being any such thing.

Let’s consider the flip side of this question for the moment. If there **were** a glass ceiling, would Christ then be obligated to dispense His Spirit to the individual Saint only in consideration of that organization’s authority structure? Must He first clear it with the ministry of ‘the Church’ before dispensing His Spirit? IF the answer is ‘NO’, and He does give a Spiritual Gift to a member, not necessarily one in high favor among the authorities in the Church, and those in authority oppose or suppress any expression of that gift, where does it leave that Church? It should be evident at this point why the term ‘degenerative condition’ is appropriate and that it may not be the small matter some would prefer it be.

This brings us back to the issue of ‘teaching’, as the Commission mandates. It leaves those Churches with hard-defined glass ceilings with a dilemma. To the degree they excel in the teaching department, they self-generate ‘problems’. What to do with those who become nearly their equal in understanding and (gulp) perhaps even competence? There is a dilemma created that many would prefer not to have. It is for such reason that congregations are spoon fed what has been described as ‘baby food’ so as to sidestep this knotty little problem. Particularly among the one-man oriented organizations, which feel especially threatened by competence among their membership. We have people who have been ‘taught and taught and taught’ for decades who still aren’t competent to stand-in in any capacity. Couldn’t lead a discussion group, can’t conduct a simple Bible Study, and has little ability to even

pose and discuss a relevant point of truth in one. And, certainly couldn't stand against any doctrinal challenge from 'outside'. What can we say of them after all that 'teaching'? If that is what we have after all that time, shouldn't their 'illustrious teachers' consider hanging up their shingle? Doesn't such a condition speak volumes as to their 'teaching credentials'? Are we looking here at a situation like what is described rather pointedly in Ezekiel 34? The similarities are discomfiting.

It is easy to understand how our 'glass ceiling' conditions regularly cause what we regard as 'splits' among the congregations. Inevitably, there will be people who see themselves as having a level of competence that qualifies them to go do what the Commission calls for. The problem is, most of the time, those motivated to 'do something' are desirous of the same 'position' they see their organized ministry exhibiting. In a way, their actions are commendable, but in another way, not! That in proportion to the desire to serve and carry out the Commission as opposed to just climbing up above the perceived glass ceiling and creating the same structure of being 'over' those he regards as below himself. Most of our 'upstarts' do what they do by dividing up the pre-existing pie to attain a level of self-aggrandizement, not so much with intent to 'go into all the world'!

A Question of Motivation

It originates **within** ourselves. The desire for personal pre-eminence that even the disciples exhibited prior to their conversion.¹ Where this problem is most obscene is when an organization's top positions of authority are filled with many with such tendencies undetected and certainly unabated. It does happen! It happened!! Too many of our genre are hooked on the pattern learned in the sixties to eighties in the WCG, which has become the standard they attempt to replicate, despite the oppressive conditions it brought upon us, and the great catastrophe it lead to in time. Even in those ministries which have distanced themselves from the 'one-man-only' mentality can still extend the characteristics of the 'hierarchical' environment. Methodist types can exhibit it as well as can our Presbyterian types.

But we are still faced with the aspect of fully complying with the Commission as Christ gave it. Those trained should be doing the same themselves. Their 'overlords' however are all too often found actively suppressing any effort in that regard, as they see any such activity as a challenge to their personal status. You see, it's really about them!

The Purpose of Leadership

This brings us back to the 'degenerative feedback condition'. The formula Christ gave for how it was to be done included within it a formula for growth. The version (or vision) of the Commission that is most commonly employed, with its clear distinction between membership and leadership, tends to dampen growth. Not that there shouldn't be leadership in the congregations, **there should**. But any such leadership should be continually working to promote growth in its people. Growth in both knowledge and competence. But, what we usually see is a power structure oriented to promoting the pre-eminence of its sole leader primarily. Those underlings placed in 'positions' not fully dedicated toward upholding and enhancing the pre-eminence of the leader are deemed just not useful, as that's the primary objective: Building up the leader, not reaching out to those in need of rescue from sure destruction. Not actually feeding the flock! Not rescuing those who have 'gone astray' or who were driven off due to mistreatment! This is especially the case in those organizations set up specifically with focus on 'one-man' leadership. Such orientation dampens the regenerative aspect Christ built into His Greater Commission.

God's Church ought to be an environment in which we see the ongoing generation of capable, evangelizing individuals. It's been our experience to see that situation ignored and even directly suppressed to the degree we have focused on promoting the pre-eminence of the particular leader or leadership of the moment. And, so long as we take that approach, we don't and effectively **can't** fully comply with Christ's mandate! *"Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you:"* One of the things He commanded them to do was to go into all the world! Not just to incessantly 'attend' Church with

¹ Luke 22:24, Matt. 20:20-24, Mk. 10:35-45, etc.

no intent of being responsive or productive. The usual 'response' desired by 'leadership' on the part of the membership is reticent submission to the leader of the moment. That at times has been touted as the greatest indicator of conversion. We've been conditioned to be the way we are for so long that the suggestion of personal involvement on the part of all who are imbued of God's Spirit is dismissed as being 'improper'! What an obscenity! Can we see why God chose and chooses to 'shut down' certain ministries after a time? They are, in effect, set-up for anti-fruitfulness. In effect, facilitators of congregations of largely 'unprofitable servants'!

A come-back to this is often that we are to **support our leadership** in them 'doing the Work'. There is a certain amount of validity to that, but all too often it degenerates into two things: An exercise for just elevating the status or pre-eminence of a particular leadership, and secondly and perhaps more importantly, it provides a comforting excuse for not personally being fruitful. We might also identify a third fault of this view, in that it usually excuses taking on an 'exclusivist' mentality, with supposedly justified contempt for any *other* parallel 'work' that might exist.

Consider how that worked out in the past. It created a consensus within the general membership that we had no personal responsibility, God always works through just one man, He will correct him, that we need do nothing whatsoever, it seems, no matter what. Where that eventually led us was into the rank, dank cavern of apostasy, and way too few had the presence of mind to wake up to reality in time to save that organization! It is today effectively **gone!** We are where we are today in large part as a result of having made that mistake. And, I fault we members as much as those who sold us on that organizational tripe!

Visionaries Wanted!

A recent article of one of these successor churches made an appeal for 'visionaries'. Despite the lead-in of the wording of the title, it actually sought or defined 'visionary' as a member with a clear goal in mind of 'just attaining the Kingdom', not actually doing anything, and certainly not coming up with ways to do something better than the staid,

low key manner under current employ! This is more than sad!

An insightful article, printed in the *American Christian* magazine in 1992, is available from this author. It takes an oblique look at the phenomenon of hierarchical government found within churches, not with the Church of God in mind. Two eras of the Church in Revelation 2 had a problem with the political structure known as 'Nicolaitanism'. It was introduced into the Church in the late first century and became solidified by the fourth. It was a term never adequately defined to our generation. This article goes a long way to illustrate how we were distracted so as to not realize what they didn't want us to ever consider!

Rare in our time would be the assessment and commendation offered by the Apostle Paul to the Church in Thessalonica: "*We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; 3: Remembering without ceasing **your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; 4: Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God. 5: For our gospel came not unto you in word only, but **also in power**, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance; as ye know what manner of men we were among you for your sake. 6: And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: 7: So that **ye were ensamples to all that believe...** 8: For **from you sounded out the word** of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place **your faith to God-ward is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing.**" (1st Thessalonians 1: KJV) These forever stand as commendable examples of what we all should be! **Ω*****

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