

1992

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The Great Commission IN QUADRIPHONIC SOUND

BY PAUL ANDERSON

AS WE EXPLORE the similarities and differences between the four Gospels in the freshman Bible class I teach, just about every semester one of my students will ask, "Why is the 'Great Commission' mentioned in all four Gospels?" Normally in the charts we use, when the same miracle or teaching is included in more than one Gospel, it appears in a list other than those containing material unique to a particular Gospel. But not so with the Great Commission. It occurs within each of the four Gospels—and yet in fascinating, different ways.

Rather than hearing a "monophonic" recording of Jesus' command to His followers, it's like listening to a "quadriphonic" rendition of it, as each of the Gospel writers complements the others with his own distinctive perspective. This also means that one's understanding of Jesus' Commission in the New Testament will be fullest if one explores its renditions in all four Gospels, rather than just one.

Let's consider similarities of the Great Commission in all four Gospels. Notice that in all four accounts. The Great Commission is declared by the resurrected Lord. This means that it reflects early Christians' understandings of how the church was to continue the very work and ministry that Jesus had begun. Furthermore, it represents their understandings of Christian discipleship in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Often we read in the Gospels that the disciples were a bit "fuzzy" (my paraphrase) about

what Jesus meant—until after the resurrection—when all things became clear. The Great Commission is a prime example of that clarified understanding. It represents the early Christians' understandings of how they were to continue the work of Jesus as commissioned by the risen Lord.

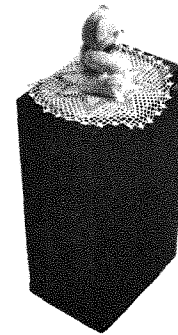
Within all four Gospels, Jesus' command is portrayed like a "last will and testament." It motivates Jesus' would-be followers by declaring His final intention for their lives. Jesus leaves no room for ambiguity or second-guessing. His words are directive. Clear. They call for responsive obedience to His mandate. In that sense, the articulation of Christian mission becomes a "com-mission," as the hearer of the Word "comes alongside" Jesus as a partner in furthering His mission.

Notice that in each case, the commissioning message of Jesus is "translated" for a specific Christian audience, reflecting the understanding of the gospel writer and the specific needs of his situation. As Everett Cattell has said (*Christian Mission*, Friends United Press, 1981, p. 1):

"It is clear that before his ascension and in different places he discussed this subject and the whole of those discourses has not been recorded. Different disciples were struck by one or another part of his message and preserved those portions which impressed them most."

This is one of the things that makes Bible study exciting. As we explore the similar—and yet distinctive—ways in which the Great Commission was articulated within the early church, our under-

standings of Christian mission today become enriched. We may even detect a progression of theme that clarifies for us what the Lord's commission involves for His followers today. Now for a look at the distinctive elements in the four gospel renditions.



1 The Great Commission in Mark: Go and Preach the Gospel to All Creation.

Mark was the first Gospel written (probably in the 60s A.D.), and it usually gives us a good impression of Christian understandings about Jesus in the middle first century. However, the Great Commission in Mark appears in Mark 16:15, which is included in a section (Mark 16:9-20) not found in the earliest Greek manuscripts.

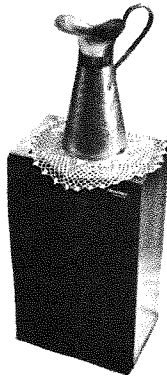
Nevertheless, despite significant differences of style and nuance, the commissioning words of Jesus here are remarkably similar to Mark's emphases upon being sent and proclaiming the Good News.

John the Baptist "kicks off" the ministry of Jesus, having been sent by God to prepare the way of the Lord (Mark 1:3).

upon being sent and proclaiming the Good News. After John was imprisoned, Jesus' ministry comes into its own (Mark 1:15): "The time has come. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Good News." He calls His first four disciples to leave their nets and to follow Him (Mark 1:16-20). He appoints the twelve to be with Him and to proclaim the Gospel (Mark 3:14-19) and then sends them out by twos to preach repentance, to drive out demons, and to heal the sick (Mark 6:7-13). It is not surprising, therefore, that even in Mark's "second ending" the command to "go and preach" is central. It represents the apostolic sense of urgency the first Christians must have felt in their mission to spread the Gospel. Regardless of the receptivity of the "soils" or the fate of the "seed" (Mark 4:3-20), they are to broadcast the Word—thus continuing the mission and message of Jesus.

2

The Great Commission in Luke/Acts: Stay Until You Are Filled with Power Then You Will Be My Witnesses.



To the mandate to go and preach, Luke adds the indispensable factor of divine empowerment. The closing scenes of Luke dovetail into the opening scenes of Acts—like a feature movie and its climactic sequel. In Luke 24:49 the disciples are commanded to wait, to tarry in the city until they are clothed with divine Power from on high. After leading them to Bethany, Jesus lifts up His hands and blesses them before ascending into heaven (Luke 24:50-51). At once, their response is to become consumed in worship, joy, and praising God (vv. 52-53). Indeed, they are filled with and immersed in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5).

The book of Acts, however, adds the implication of such encounters—to be changed by Christ is to be commissioned by Christ. "But you will receive Power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth." (Acts 1:8) Indeed, the rest of Acts documents the fulfillment of this prediction. The Christian movement grows with unassailable force—first locally, then regionally, then nationally, and finally, globally. But the central factor according to Luke is the

empowering force of the Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit the church is impotent. How often well-meaning Christians are tempted to start into a missions project, well-strategized and fully enthused, but without having waited on the Lord until being filled with Power from on high. Luke reminds us that the success of spiritual mission always hinges upon spiritual empowerment, and this comes from prayerful waiting on the Lord.



3

The Great Commission in Matthew: Go and Make Disciples of All Nations.

Just as Luke contributes the element of empowerment of the Spirit, Matthew adds the community-building motifs to Mark's stark "go and preach." As Luke and Acts were probably written in the 70s or 80s, Matthew was probably written in the 80s as the church was faced with making the transition from being a growing movement to becoming a larger institution. The church-building interest of Matthew is clear from several examples: (a) Only in Matthew's Gospel is the word *ecclesia* (church) mentioned. (b) One of these passages (Matthew 16:17-19) outlines the institutional means by which Peter (and Jesus?) will be succeeded. (c) The other emphasizes the importance of accountability, proper church discipline procedure, and the necessity of seasoning authority with a spirit of forgiveness and grace (Matthew 18:15-35). It is therefore not surprising at all that Matthew is interested in the discipling work of the church. Rather than simply going and preaching, the Christian emissary is commanded to go and "make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19)

Notice that the discipling process is described as having two basic functions: *induction* and *education* (v. 20). New believers are to be baptized "in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and the main point here is that by means of Christ's authority (v. 18), their admission to the new community is confirmed with divine finality. To interpret the emphasis to be on the Jewish ritual of water baptism here, instead of what it symbolized, is to miss the point and to reduce the Great Commission to

ritualism. John's baptism signified the turning from the world and repentance from sin. Jesus' baptism, on the other hand, involves being immersed in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 19:1-6; John 1:33; 3:5-8), and this is what confirms one's membership in the family of God (John 1:12).

It is often wrongly assumed that Quakers don't believe in baptism. But we do, and radically so. One cannot live the Christian life without being transformed by the baptism of Jesus, which is *with fire and the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26-34; Acts 11:16). Water prefigured this spiritual immersion, and even came to symbolize it within the Christian movement. But Jesus apparently did not employ water baptism (John 4:2), and it should never be confused with the "real thing," which an abiding immersion in the Spirit of Christ alone can offer.

After initiation follows education. Notice that Jesus is not portrayed here as simply extending "best wishes" to the spiritual infant before abandoning him or her to the task of maturation. No. He commands His followers to teach—just as they have been taught by Him. In this way, the new believer grows into maturity, and the church becomes strengthened in its conviction.

Virtually everywhere the church thrives, it is because it has become able to introduce new Christians into the community of faith successfully, and it has learned to prepare people for ministry effectively. This is what it means to make disciples of all nations.

4

The Great Commission in John: As the Father Has Sent Me, So Send I All of You.



John's is the "apostolic Gospel." Rather than leaving the role of apostleship to an "office" or to a church hierarchy, John takes great pains to emphasize Jesus' imbuing all of His followers with apostolic mission. The Greek word *apostolos* means "one who is sent," and Jesus extends His own divine commission to include His followers. To be an apostle is to have encountered Jesus Christ and to be sent by Him. Thus, the invitation to follow Him is, at the same time, a calling

to be sent by Him—as His “friends”—who both know the Master’s business, and who are responsive to His leadings (John 15:14-15).

Notice the apparent correctives to rising institutionalism within the late first century Christian movement (John 20:21-23). (a) Apostolicity is extended to “the many,” not just “the few” (v. 21). Far from an elitist appeal for a few super-Christians to labor in the fields of service “unrewarded,” John here portrays Jesus as *involving all of His followers in mission*. In this sense, Apostolic Christianity lives today! To encounter the Spirit of the risen Lord is to be commissioned by Him, and this is the spiritual basis of true apostolic succession.

(b) Jesus “breathed on” (inspired) them and declared, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” (v. 22) Rather than imbuing an “office” or a ceremony with God-breathed authority or efficacy, Jesus fills them with His Spirit by the mere fact of His presence (see also Matthew 18:20). He also promises to lead them into all Truth through His comforting and convicting presence within the gathered meeting, and this is the basis for their sense of peace (John 14:25-27; 16:7-15; 20:19).

(c) Jesus gives them the responsibility to be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation in the world (v. 23). Just as the role of apostle is expanded from the few to the many, so is the priesthood of believers. As a contrast to Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, the privilege/responsibility of extending God’s saving forgiveness is given to all of Jesus’ followers, not just Peter and his successors. In this sense, the healing/saving work of Jesus is multiplied by the number of His followers who heed the call and accept the commission.

To summarize, when we consider the Great Commission in all four Gospels we get a fuller picture—or a quadriphonic rendition—of what our Christian mission ought to be like today. It involves going and preaching; waiting on the filling of the Holy Spirit; making disciples of all nations; and embodying the apostolic, inspired, and priestly ministry of Jesus himself. Perhaps this is what Paul had in mind when he declared that “all creation groans in eager expectation for the revelation of the children of God.” (Romans 8:19) As we encounter the risen Lord and are commissioned by Him to continue His saving/revealing work in the world, the Incarnation happens anew. We indeed become Jesus’ hands and feet—furthering work He came to do. ☞

Paul Anderson teaches New Testament and Quaker studies at George Fox College in Newberg, Oregon and edits the EVANGELICAL FRIEND.