

## STUDY 9

# The Church and the Gospel: The Transformed People Must Speak

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Geoffrey Bingham wrote:

There has been much debate about whether what is called ‘the Great Commission’ is in the imperative or not. I think it can be successfully shown that in the four gospels, and especially in their endings, Jesus gives *direction* as to what they will do rather than commanding them to do it. For example, in Matthew 28:19, Jesus says, ‘Go [going] therefore and make disciples of all nations’. That is, Jesus is saying that they will have gone and so the command is to disciple the nations rather than a command to go. I think that this can be seen to be the spirit of Luke 24:46–49. If there is a command it is to wait in Jerusalem for the coming of the Holy Spirit. In Mark 16:15 the ‘go’ is again a participle—going—which is presupposed. The command is to proclaim the gospel to all the Creation. In John 20:21 (cf. John 17:18) Jesus puts the sending on a high level, ‘As the Father has sent me, even so I send you’. Having said all this, I think that we should be careful not to put imperatives into the indicative lest we withdraw the power from the imperative. I have said elsewhere that the measure of a true human being is to love to be commanded, and so to be one with God’s will rather than to be induced to do it by the seduction of the will. This latter takes away the dignity of being one, voluntarily, with God in His plan and purpose for Creation. The disciples were one with Jesus in doing His Father’s grand will and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The significance of this quote, in part, lies in his refusal to function on the level of law as the motivation for mission. However, there can be little doubt that often the church is presented with the ‘command’ of Jesus, especially in Matthew 28:18–20, as the dominant reason for mission in the world today. In a later session we will examine that command and others, but for the present I want to work from a different angle.

As we examine the New Testament, a couple of significant features emerge. The first is that the ‘Great Commission’ has its primary place within the overall structure of Matthew’s gospel. A second feature is that its place within Matthew’s gospel is basically the place it stays. Nowhere in either the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters is there any place for a command based on the Great Commission. Yet what is also prominent is that the early church (and for our present purposes that means the church in Acts) was a proclaiming community.

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bingham, *God and Man in the Mission of the Kingdom*, Redeemer Baptist Press, North Parramatta, 2003, pp. 216f.

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Perhaps it is a little pedantic to observe that it is only in Matthew's gospel that there is a certain command to 'make disciples'. The evidence of Mark's gospel is difficult since there are at least three known endings: the 'shorter ending' which does not contain a command as such and which actually ascribes Jesus himself as the one working through those around Peter; the 'longer ending' (Mark 16:9–20) which, to my mind at least, though ancient is not part of the original gospel; and the truncated ending, i.e. Mark 16:8, which is the way many manuscripts end the gospel. But whatever conclusion we reach, I suggest that we should not dogmatically build on uncertainty. Luke's gospel, while clearly preparing the reader for what appears in Acts, does not contain a command to go; rather its only command is to 'stay in the city until . . .' John's gospel also contains no command. In all these, of course, there is the assumption that something tremendous is about to take place—and so it does!

The Acts of the Apostles has also been seen to be the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Both aspects are true<sup>2</sup> but it is the place of Pentecost in the life and witness of the church that demands our attention now.<sup>3</sup> In Acts the witness of the church to the risen Jesus is nowhere linked to a command, but it is directly linked to the promise of the Holy Spirit with the consequent movement of the witnesses throughout the whole world. There was no 'Christian' proclamation until Pentecost. But after the Spirit was poured out there was a total change, not only in the people who had received the Spirit, but also in what they said. For instance, how much space was evidently given to 'the stories of Jesus' such as we read in the gospels? Admittedly we are told that Cornelius knew the accounts of Jesus' preaching, doing good and healing (Acts 10:36–38) and that King Agrippa knew the things of which Paul spoke for 'this<sup>4</sup> was not done in a corner' (Acts 26:26), so that those in Palestine, especially in the early years, might be expected to have heard of, if not actually witnessed, Jesus' ministry. But still none of the stories are recounted and when Jesus was quoted in Acts 20:35 it was by a saying not found in the gospels and was used to validate Paul's example.

It was not the stories of Jesus' Palestinian ministry that gripped the preachers but the fact of his being raised from the dead. And they knew that, not because it was a doctrinal 'given' but because they had received the Holy Spirit. The implications of the resurrection was that they now had a gospel to preach but that was first a gospel which had come into them.

The church in Acts did not need a law or commandment in order to speak. From the day of Pentecost onwards they were compelled by the action of God upon them. So the initial proclamation was actually not that by Peter in Jerusalem but by those who had received the Spirit and who now spoke out 'the mighty works of God' (Acts 2:11).<sup>5</sup> Whether it was them speaking to God or to the people who heard them is probably beside the point, but it is instructive that if it was praise that issued from the

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<sup>2</sup> See Roland Allen, 'Pentecost and the World' in *The Ministry of the Spirit: Selected Writings of Roland Allen*, David M. Paton (ed.), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960, pp. 3f. I want to stress the significance of Roland Allen's writings. Geoffrey Bingham was insistent to me that though he often referred to P. T. Forsyth and, less often, to James Denney, it was Allen who provided the real impetus for his thinking and ministry. I would urge us all not only to read Allen's works but to make the substance of them known to the people of God.

<sup>3</sup> Also worth obtaining—and reading—is Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1961.

<sup>4</sup> Possibly the singular is used to refer to Paul's preaching. It has been pointed out by some that Paul is using a Greek proverb.

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation or paraphrases.

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believers then it meant that official ‘preaching’ is not the issue, as is affirmed in 1 Peter 3:15.

Because of the transforming power of the Spirit in the believers, Peter then had his opportunity to explain how it was they were so changed. His point was that Jesus had been raised from the dead and that he, far from being a failed messianic claimant, was no less than Lord and Messiah and that he was the one who had received the Spirit as his to give to those whom God called. The climax of Israel’s hope had come in Jesus. What was more, the promise was that those who responded would also share in that same gift of the Spirit. The response of three thousand people that day was evidently so profound that they ‘devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers’ (Acts 2:42). They had all received the Spirit of God, which meant that they had received the forgiveness of sins, adoption as children of God and wondrous participation in the body of Christ. It is hardly surprising that with all that, and more, they went to the apostles for teaching as to what it all meant.

When persecution broke out in full in Jerusalem, although the apostles managed to remain in the city, many of these new believers had to escape into the Judean countryside or into Samaria. But it is well known that ‘those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word’ (Acts 8:4). In this they were no different to the apostles, Peter and John, who could not keep from speaking about what they had seen and heard (Acts 4:20). The pattern exemplified by Jeremiah (20:7–9) was worked out in the church, that the word given was ‘like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot’.

There were times of calm for the church and the growth of the church was not hindered by it at all; nor was it helped by suffering *per se* (Acts 9:31). It is not really true to say that ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’.<sup>6</sup> Luke’s statement continued: ‘Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, [the church] increased in numbers’. So after proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead’ (Acts 4:2), Peter’s testimony was that of a man ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 4:8). The response of the gathered believers to the opposition of the Jewish leaders was to pray that the word be spoken with boldness, and the result was that ‘they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness’ (Acts 4:29–31).

The church was, or ought to have been, living in the awareness of the presence and power and holiness of the Holy Spirit. Thus Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of lying to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3). As the church lived in fear of offending the Holy Spirit, ‘none of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women’ (Acts 5:11, 13–14). Later, when the apostles were brought before the High Priest, the topic was still the resurrection of Jesus, but the witness given by the apostles was one with that given by the Holy Spirit:

But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him’ (Acts 5:29–32).

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<sup>6</sup> Tertullian, *Apology*, ch. 50: ‘The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed’.

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It was not just a verbal likeness but a witness given in total harmony with the Spirit. Where there is disobedience there is no holy power, indeed there is no desire for that sort of power at all. This is evidenced in Acts 6, where the whole community of the disciples was urged to select seven men ‘full of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:3). The result of the choice of these men was that ‘the word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith’ (Acts 6:7). The power of the word of God was the power of the Spirit by whom it was spoken (Acts 6:10; see also 7:55).

To receive the word of God was to receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14, 17; 19:2). The word of God was nothing less than the prophetic witness of the church (Acts 2:17–18). The word given was received and so they must speak. But the word could never be something the church has as its own possession. The word first had them. It could never be seen as distinct from God himself. The word was always God or the risen Lord Jesus speaking. So when expounding the particular application of the gospel to the churches Paul could point out that ‘faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word [the utterance, *rhēma*] of Christ’ (Rom. 10:17). The church is to take ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the *rhēma*, the utterance of God’ (Eph. 6:17) and that sword is never a book or a doctrine. It is a word (*logos*) given and received and so spoken (Eph. 6:19).

The church was never to be moved by the need of fallen humanity, though plainly to be without compassion for the world in its plight was to be quite different from God and Jesus. It was to be moved by the action and word of the Spirit of God. The need does not determine the call. There were needs in Antioch, but the Holy Spirit had his own purpose for Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–4). Paul and Barnabas were ‘sent out by the Holy Spirit’ and the church could only rise up in faith and acknowledge that. There were distinct needs in Asia and Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, would not permit them to take those needs as direction. Surprisingly, too, I can think of no place where the church was told to pray for the conversion of the lost. But it was asked to pray for the preachers (Eph. 6:19; Matt. 9:37–38). The reason for that seems simple: God was—and is—already in action to save the lost: ‘as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region’ (Acts 13:48–49), ‘the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed’ (Acts 19:20). True, the message concerned Jesus, but the word of the Lord was first the word issuing as a sword from the mouth of the Lord Jesus.

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Mission is not an option for the church, not because it is a legal obligation laid upon us but because it is of the essence of the redeemed community. The ‘Go’ of Matthew 28:19 may not be the command it appears.<sup>7</sup> Certainly the Great Commission is never used in the New Testament letters to generate some movement by the church. In fact, there is, I think, no command in the letters addressed to believers to get them to proclaim. A possible exception might be 1 Corinthians 15:34, but the context seems to point to that being a reference to members of, or at least in, the church.

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<sup>7</sup> I will examine this in Session 12, ‘The Great Co–Mission and the Great Commission’.

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In Ephesians 4:7–10 Paul wrote:

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people.' (When it says, 'He ascended,' what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

It can be shown that 'Christ's gift' probably is a reference to the gift (*dōrea*) of the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> We should notice too that the gifts distributed were with a view to Christ 'filling all things' (possibly a reference to Jesus 'the last Adam?') and that one of the gifts he has given, in order that *he* might accomplish this, is the gift of evangelist.

Given all this, it is plain that the drive for godly living is never law but rather it comes from a rich refreshment in the gospel which has come to the church and through which Christ has brought the church to himself and filled it with his Spirit. Hence the commands(!): 'Go on being filled with the Spirit' (Eph. 5:18), 'live by the Spirit' (Gal. 5:16, 25), 'be aglow with the Spirit' (Rom. 12:11, RSV), 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly' (Col. 3:16), all within the context of the gospel's power.

Where there is a diminished drive for mission, the solution lies in the word continually being brought to us. This is equally true for a refreshment in godliness and for sweet fellowship in the church. It all flows from a new or renewed awareness of the great work of Christ for us, in us and then through us. Law may seem to work more quickly, but it is never the means by which God works. In the long run (and the not so long run) law works wrath, but the fruit of the gospel, the fruit of the Spirit, that is quite another matter!

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<sup>8</sup> See James D. G. Dunn, 'Δωρεά as the Gift of the Holy Spirit' in *The Christ and the Spirit: Volume 2—Pneumatology* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998), pp. 207–9.