

## STUDY 12

# The Great Co-Mission and the Great Commission

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William Carey is known as the father of modern missions and that is an honorable title. He was not the first to make the point,<sup>1</sup> but it was the publication in 1792 of his booklet, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use Means for the conversion of the Heathen*,<sup>2</sup> which marked the beginning of a new era of missionary work, particularly by Protestants. The Roman Catholics had a far better record. One result flowing from Carey's stress on the binding nature of the Great Commission has been an almost universal agreement with him, while another has been summarised by Roland Allen:

It is almost universally taken for granted that missionary work is the work of a paid professional class, and that the utmost that can be expected of those who do not belong to this class is to support those who do; and even that is not expected of the majority. Missionary societies began their crusade, not by striving to call out the spirit of Christian men whose occupation carried them abroad, not by trying to impress upon the Church at home that Christ calls all His people to witness for Him wherever they may be, wherever they may go, but by creating an army of professional missionaries. The whole system of societies, boards, offices, accounts, contracts with missionaries, statistical returns, reports, reeks of it. From every missionary society there goes out every day and all day into every part of the world with one insistent, unceasing voice the proclamation, that the Gospel must be preached in all the world, and that it must be preached by special agents maintained by a society for this particular work.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting that although the argument runs that the Great Commission is still binding on Christians, even Carey thought of preaching as a special function. Speaking of Acts 8, he wrote:

all *the preachers* except the apostles were driven thence, and went everywhere preaching the word.<sup>4</sup>

whereas Luke observed that all the church was scattered, except the apostles, and those who were scattered preached the word (Acts 8:1, 4). But whatever our opinion of this, the dominance of the Great Commission stands.

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter O'Brien, 'The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20' in *The Reformed Theological Review*, vol. XXXV, no. 3, pp. 66–78; Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1961.

<sup>2</sup> A pdf version will be supplied by email on request, or may be downloaded from various internet sites.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Allen (1869–1947), *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It* (1927), Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1962, pp. 106f.

<sup>4</sup> pdf version, p. 6.

## *The Great Co-Mission and the Great Commission*

First, I want to examine a couple of aspects of the passage Matthew 28:16–20.

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.

It is the eleven who are specified. The presence of doubters (v. 17) has been taken by some as suggesting others besides the eleven, but the text does not say so.

<sup>17</sup> When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’.

Could this be more than just ‘Jesus is Lord of all’? Given the introduction of Matthew’s gospel, where the lineage of Jesus is shown from Abraham and that in Abraham (i) all the nations will be blessed; and (ii) all that was true for Adam was re-stated<sup>5</sup> (is the word ‘genesis’ [‘genealogy’ NRSV] in Matt. 1:1 significant?) and given the great status of the first Adam in the creation (Gen. 1:26), can we see this claim by Jesus as the declaration that the last Adam stands before the eleven, fully set now to rule the creation? More, he is set to rule the nations (see Psalm 2), so what follows may be complex, but it is not unimportant.

<sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

‘Go’ is emphatic in English, but the Greek may be a little more complex. ‘Go’ translates *poreuthentes*, an aorist participle, which, standing alone, would mean ‘having gone’. But as it is linked with ‘make disciples’, *mathēteusate*, an aorist imperative, the participle has been understood to be functioning in the same way as the main verb. Hence, if the main verb is a command, ‘make disciples’, then the participle simply adds force to the command. That is the way it has been expressed in every English translation which I have examined.

But this need not be the case in every situation.<sup>6</sup> The traditional translation has

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<sup>5</sup> See N. T. Wright, ‘Adam, Israel and the Messiah’, in *The Climax of the Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993, pp. 18ff.

<sup>6</sup> The specialist Greek grammar of Blass Debrunner and Funk (University of Chicago Press, 1961, pp. 174f.) puts it: ‘Participles originally had no temporal function, but denoted only the *Aksionsart*; their temporal relation to the finite verb was derived from the context. Since, however, a participle expressing the notion of completion often preceded the finite verb . . . so that the sequence normally was: the completion of the action denoted by the participle,

## *The Great Co-Mission and the Great Commission*

made certain assumptions. But what if there was a good reason for maintaining the full force of the participle? ‘Having gone, make disciples’ may very well reflect: (i) that Adam was commanded to ‘fill the earth’; (ii) that fallen humanity rejected that (Gen. 11:4); so (iii) that now the disciples of the last Adam will naturally be one with him in his going, as he will be with them (v. 20).

‘Make disciples of all nations’ is distinctly Abrahamic in its intention. Wonderful as seeing individuals (‘out of every tribe’; etc. Rev. 5:9; etc.) coming to faith may be, the goal is the nations (*ta ethnē*) gathered as one, multi-ethnic bride.

<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

The nations are to be made disciples *of Jesus*. This has already been implied in Matthew 7:21 and 24 etc, where doing ‘the will of my Father in heaven’ is equated with hearing and doing ‘these words of mine’.

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

If the disciples are to be one with him in his going to claim the nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession, then they should remember that he is with them always, not to help them when they can do no more but as the one who is doing it all through them. The end of the age comes when he ‘hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet’ (1 Cor 15:24–25).

It is evident from Acts 8:1 that the apostles did not see leaving Jerusalem, even in persecution, as an obligation. Going to the nations was forced upon Peter at one point (Acts 11:12, 17, ‘who was I?’), but he remained an apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:7–8). Later traditions aside, the scriptures say almost nothing about the apostles going to the nations. Just as James 1:1 indicates that James was writing to Jewish Christians, a good case can be made for saying that 1 Peter 1:1, ‘to the exiles of the dispersion’, means the same thing.

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then the action of the finite verb, the idea of relative past time became associated to a certain degree with the aorist participle . . . The notion of relative past time, however, is not at all necessarily inherent in the aorist participle. The element of past time is absent from the aorist participle especially *if* its action is identical with that of an aorist finite verb’ (my emphasis). But my question is simply this: how can we say that the action of the participle is definitely identical with the action of ‘make disciples’? That is an exegetical decision.

## *The Great Co-Mission and the Great Commission*

So what of the command to make disciples of all nations? Given to the eleven disciples, why did they, at least, not go? But the twelve (i.e. including Matthias) or the thirteen when we include the ‘untimely born’ Paul, and the wider apostolic band (i.e. those immediately associated with them) could never on any physical level have completed the task. But, as apostles they are completing it now, just as Christ is still at work winning the nations! It is Paul who stresses the way this is taking place, in 1 Corinthians 1:17–18 etc., where his mandate is to proclaim the gospel, because that alone is the power of God (see Rom. 1:16). But more, this gospel is ‘apostolic’ not because it derives from them; it is apostolic because of their unique role (just as the church is ‘apostolic’)—but their gospel is authoritative and powerful because it was given by Christ. So Galatians 1:11–12:

For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

A generalisation no doubt, but the dullness of the church, pre-Carey and now, does not lie just in disobedience to the Great Commission, but in the reduction of the apostolic gospel to something substantially less than the power of God. The gospel has been reduced to information that requires ‘unpacking’ or explanation but never to simple faith-full proclamation. So it requires trained ‘professionals’ who hold the keys of death and Hades in their educated hands. And the people of God love to have it so!

By some, the gospel has also been reduced to varying degrees of social action. So I want now, briefly, to examine the message of Luke 4 and 24. First Luke 4:17–21:

[T]he scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: This has been called the ‘Nazareth Manifesto’ and usually examined the context of Christian social action.

<sup>18</sup> ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release [*aphesis*] to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free [in *aphesis*],’ The quotation is from Isaiah 61:1–2 and 58:6. In its context it does indeed relate to social action, especially as Israel was conspicuously ignoring its obligations as the people of God (see Isa. 58:1–7). Within this framework, the use of this passage is no different to the message of John the Baptist in Luke 3:7–14.

<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ ‘The year of the Lord’s favor’ was the jubilee year, the 50th year when all debts were cancelled (Lev. 25:8–24ff.).

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

## *The Great Co-Mission and the Great Commission*

<sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' The anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit marked the breaking in of a momentous fulfilment of this promise. The gift of the Spirit upon Jesus declares that he is the one who is fully Israel and so the one who will accomplish all that Israel ought to have done. As the fulfilment of Israel, he pointed to the way that Gentiles received a benefit under Elijah and Elisha, perhaps implying that they would do so again from him. This was a confrontation with the prevailing attitude of the audience and provoked a violent response (Luke 4:28–30).

The writers of the four gospels were acutely aware of what they were about. Each, in his own way, produced not just a biography of Jesus but a proclamation of him. This section of Luke is a significant part of the whole gospel. It marks the commencement of Jesus' public ministry and sets its agenda.

What should be noted is Jesus has reassigned the promise of Isaiah to himself. More than that, Luke has shown us what is fundamental to Jesus' ministry, by the use of the word *aphesis* which I have inserted into the text above. Prior to this, that word was used by Luke at 1:77 and 3:3. On both occasions the reference is to John the Baptist and the *aphesis* of sins.<sup>7</sup> So, later at the climax of the gospel, when Jesus speaks with the eleven and their companions in Luke 24, he simply asserts that these will be engaged in the ministry which he has. But it is an amazing assertion:

Thus it is written [that] the Christ [is] to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day and [that] in his name is to be proclaimed repentance and forgiveness [*aphesis*] of sins—beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–47, my translation).

Jesus' focus was indeed on *aphesis*, but that is the *aphesis* of the forgiveness of sins! There is no command here, either for the apostles or for the church. There is simply the statement that this is the way things will be. There will be a proclamation that is one with the prophetic anticipation of Jesus by John and with Jesus himself. So these men are to wait. They are witnesses of these things but they must go as he did, 'in the power of the Spirit' (Luke 4:14; John 20:21–22). So they needed to be 'clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49). Hence Acts 1:1–8. And that is what happened. The church, filled with the Spirit, is his 'witnesses'. Through them he will continue to speak the liberating word, for he is 'Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth, who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood' (Rev. 1:5).

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<sup>7</sup> The same word is used in the LXX of Lev. 16:26 where the context is the sending away of sin (remission).