

Part Eighteen

GREAT COMMISSION

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ORDERS FROM THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

In what is called the church today, there is a wide-spread defection from the divine mission of the body of Christ. To many it is just the same as if the Lord had not given the great commission. Do you know what He commanded, or where to find it?

Evangelism Commanded by Christ

The same day on which Jesus arose He appeared to ten of the apostles (and others with them, Luke 24:33-36) and said, "As the Father sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21-23). Perhaps at the same occasion He said, "Go into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15, 16). He sent the apostles to Galilee and appointed a certain mountain for a meeting place. When Jesus came, some doubted. This suggests that a crowd of disciples had gathered, in addition to the apostles who had already seen the risen Lord from two to four times each (See I Cor. 15:6). Jesus said, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; teaching them to observe all things whatever I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

Did the Lord give this assignment only to the apostles? How then was it to last to the end of the age? He also told them to "Pray to the Lord of the harvest that He raise up laborers for His harvest" (Matt. 9:38). He also sent Ananias to Saul to give this assignment to him (Acts 22:12-16). The Holy Spirit told the church at Antioch to send Barnabas and Saul into foreign evangelism (Acts 13:1-3). Paul told the church at Rome, "How shall they hear without a preacher and how shall they preach, except they be sent" (Rom. 10:13-15). And he told Timothy to train more preachers (II Tim. 2:2). The third epistle of John says of traveling preachers, "You will do well to send them on their way as befits God's service . . . So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth" (III John 5-8).

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In the great commission to the church, we have a Master with all authority; but most of us have not obeyed Him. We have a Message of pure truth, historic facts, clear evidence and convincing power; but have we really believed it? We have a Ministry of mercy—proclaiming repentance and remission of sins unto all men; but we have not cared enough to try.

What are you doing to carry out the work that the Lord gave us to do? Do you see the mission of the church as the Lord's body to carry His grace and truth to all men? We are the church. Is that really our mission in life? Some say they have not been called to spread the gospel. But haven't we all been sent?

Privilege and Priority of Evangelism

In view of His orders to all believers, isn't it our responsibility to go with the gospel or else to show reasonable cause to believe that the circumstances in which He has placed us were intended by Him to keep us in some position of support from the home base?

What do you think God will say in the judgment about churches or individual Christians that commend themselves for keeping the Lord's Supper every week (because they see one statement of the example of one church in Acts 20:7) and yet these same loyal churches have no active program for carrying out the direct and repeated command to preach the gospel to all men?

Other works can be done in a Christian manner, but evangelizing is the one work that the Lord distinctly commanded us to do.

"How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14). The world languishes and perishes while God waits for His people, for you and me, to tell the world of salvation.

My regret is that I have but one life to give to preaching the good news, the words of eternal life. I thank God that I can feel that I have extended my ministry by helping to send men and women to various places to tell the story. Yet, in my own feelings, I feel like asking God for a miracle of restoration of my youthful vigor and for Him to allow me to go to Europe, or South America, or Southeast Asia to spend another lifetime raising up laborers for His harvest. When I think of it, there are at least six continents and several islands where I would like to preach. If God gave me one more lifetime to do it, would I be satisfied? And why should I be granted this privilege and joy if you and you and you can be stirred up to see the challenging opportunity? Many more of God's children should have their share in the inexpressible pleasures of giving this treasure of faith and

hope and love to the multitudes whose lives will be blessed and renovated by it. That is why I am rambling on like this and baring my private thinking and selfish feelings. May Jesus Christ be praised that He has shared this privilege with us!

Let us use our present resources and opportunities and influences to do the most essential thing for the glory of God and to supply every man's greatest need.

Issues of morality and truth in society, government and education must be faced. Many see a need for general and professional education in a Christian atmosphere. But we need Bible Colleges that exist for the primary purpose of raising up messengers of the cross who will take the gospel of Christ throughout the world. Nothing else is so important. Nothing else will do so much to correct social ills.

To be effective in maintaining the faith and instilling the faith in all the students who come to such Bible Colleges, the teachers, staff and workers of the college need to be devoted to preaching the word. Many men have been challenged to leave big salaries and top positions in business or education and have turned to the preaching of Christ. Someone else can collect the taxes or turn the wheels of industry, but the spread of the gospel is a truly unmixed blessing which all men need. "Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and all the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?" Jesus said this, and He said it applies to everyone who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (Luke 12:20, 21).

I have four sons. They have varied talents and good scholastic records. They look at various things they would do and be. They shrink a little, I think, from dropping into the slot of a preacher—as I shrank more than a little. But I would rather see each of them a mediocre but devoted proclaimer of the everlasting gospel than to see any of them a great success in the things that will all perish with this passing world. If they can use their various skills to pay the way or gain entrance so that they may preach the gospel, or edify the church and multiply its workers, then praise God for that. But what right do people have to ask the church to provide personal and professional education for them to use to their own enrichment while they keep sheltered from worse contaminations of the world and feel safe in Jesus while living for self and the world?

What about general education, vocational and professional training in "secular" fields, or a high degree of human culture? Use it for Christ, for eternity, for the salvation of men sinking now into hell! But do not spend the life of a believer to promote the passing

interests of this present world for their own sakes, to be used as any unbeliever uses them!

Relying On God's Power

The church is the great divine missionary agency. The Great Commission is still the one supreme order of the supreme commander. This mission of the church rightly is the mission of every member of it. The apostles and members of the early church felt the burden and responsibility laid upon them. Why did the early church succeed so marvelously? It was not because of organization, publicity, institutions, political influence, buildings and equipment, large expenditures, or because of compromise of its doctrine with the popular ideas. They did not have the human resources and earthly means that we have today. Apparently, they did not need to depend on promoting human agencies and programs.

With plain, direct testifying to Jews and Greeks, to small and to great, they turned the world upside down. With much machinery and budgeting we do almost everything except the main thing. In Paul's lifetime, the gospel "was preached in all creation under heaven" (Col. 1:23, also v. 6). The early church took seriously our Lord's words: "We must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day; the night cometh when no man can work" (John 9:4). They sowed the seed and trusted God to give the increase (I Cor. 3:7). Their concern was "that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves" (II Cor. 4:4-7; cp. Matt. 28:20).

In the work of evangelizing, the church is to go near as well as far. If we can not go across the world for Christ, that does not excuse us for refusing to go across the street in Jesus' name. But the Lord said "Go" (Matt. 28:18). Some have suggested "As you go" as the right translation since this is a participle in the Greek original. But in New Testament usage a participle which is connected with an imperative verb derives the imperative force from the verb.¹ The going is imperative. Not all Christians will go to a foreign field; but we need to go and tell the good news whether near or far. When we send workers out we must be careful that those we send are faithful to Christ.

Are you really sure you can't go take the gospel to those who haven't heard? A young missionary challenges us to answer this question:

¹ Kenny Boles, "Go," *Christian Standard*, CIX (October 27, 1974), p. 976.

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"While vast continents are shrouded in almost utter darkness and hundreds of millions suffer the horrors of heathenism or of Islam, the burden of proof lies upon you to show that the circumstances in which God has placed you were meant by Him to keep you out of the foreign-mission field!"²

Let the believers belong to Him who purchased them. Let the church be the church. And let the will of the Lord be done! What are you doing to fulfill the imperatives of the Great Commission? Whatever you have or know, use it to obey Christ's command. Or are you A.W.O.L. from where the action is? Why should you not be shot for treason, for rebellion against the orders of the King of the Universe?

For Further Study:

- Allen, Roland. *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*, rev. ed. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962. Seeks to present principles for world evangelism and attempts to correct hindrances to spontaneous growth.
- Coleman, Robert E. *The Master Plan of Evangelism*. Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1963. A very practical and popular study of our Lord's strategy of evangelism.
- Green, Michael. *Evangelism in the Early Church*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970. Extensive history of evangelism in the church's first three centuries of existence.
- Kane, Herbert. *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspectives*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976. Pp. 34-49. What Jesus taught about missions.
- McLean, Archibald. *Where the Book Speaks*, 2nd ed. Joplin, Missouri: College Press, reprint of 1907. Preachable sermons on missions in the Bible. Chapters IV through VIII have some outstanding messages on texts from the words of Jesus.
- Tippett, Alan. *Church Growth and the Word of God*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970. A study of the principles of church growth as rooted in the Old Testament and expressed and practiced in the New Testament.

² Basil Holt, *Christian Nurture*, (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1943), p. 95.

THE WORLD MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Great Commission was one of Christ's most far-reaching commands. It is a task that can never be done and dispensed with. The evangelization of the world must always be in the process of being accomplished, but never completed and laid aside, until the Lord Himself shall come and take charge of the gathering of His own and the destruction of the wicked. It stands before us as a never ceasing test of our faith in Christ and our faithfulness to His command. Selfishness and indolence, littleness and pride, may be overwhelmed by the difficulty and magnitude of the task of winning the whole world. We may excuse ourselves for a time on the ground that we cannot do the job. But the fact remains that this is a major obligation of the follower of Christ. Evangelism is essential to the very nature of Christianity.

The follower of Jesus is a messenger for God to all the world. Jesus came from heaven to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10) and to the same work He sends us (John 20:21; Mark 16:15). Nothing else so proves the love of God for man as His sending His Son to save us from sin. Nothing else so tests the reality of our love for God and for our fellow men as what we feel and do about the salvation of the souls of men. If we love the Lord we will keep His commandments (John 14:15; I John 5:3). If we love men we will carry to them the blessings of the gospel.

The world-wide mission of the church is not to spread democracy throughout the world—and to build a world council of humanitarian organizations and humanistic religions—not to spread the doubtful benefits of western civilizations, education, and mechanization. The world mission of the church is to save souls—to dispel the darkness of sin by bringing to men the Sun of righteousness—to bring eternal life and glory to those who are condemned to death and despair—for "His divine power has granted unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue" (II Pet. 1:3). The very purpose of the church itself is often misunderstood or perverted by false and selfish leaders. An observer of the activities of many churches might think that their chief purpose was to build fine buildings; or to celebrate Christmas and Easter; or to provide respectable entertainment; or to be a community unit for dispensing all sorts of propaganda,

and for collecting funds for all sorts of campaigns and projects; or simply to provide a place to meet nice people and make friends. Now, whatever might be said in favor of any of the above activities, none of them, or all of them together, is not the essential purpose of the church. Other organizations might do all these things, and still the church would be necessary.

The real purpose of the church is to preach Christ, to serve Christ, and to perfect the rule of Christ in every heart of all mankind. The church is to build the kingdom of God: that is, to bring men to surrender to the rule of God in Jesus Christ, and to teach them to observe to do all that He has commanded (Matt. 28:18-20) until He dominates every word, thought, and act of their lives (see Col. 3:17; II Cor. 6:19, 20; 10:31). The great task before us is to evangelize and to edify, to recruit and train believers, obedient believers, in Christ, in order that in Him they may find peace, light, life, hope, love and innumerable blessings here and hereafter.

The mission of the church is evangelism. It is the same at home or abroad. Incidental conditions of home or foreign missions are secondary compared to the understanding of the mission on which we are sent by the Lord. When we understand and believe the gospel of Christ, then, by the very nature of it, we are compelled and constrained to take it to all men.

Compelled by the Command of Christ

The Great Commission is the King's command. It is the marching orders of the army of the Lord. He sends and we must go. If the church serves Christ, who bought it and built it, who is head over all things pertaining to the church, then it must obey His command to go into all the world, preach the gospel to the whole creation, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all His commands (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, 16; Acts 1:8). This command was given with the express reminder that He had all authority in heaven and on earth.

This command was not given to the apostles alone. The fact that its provisions extend to the "end of the world" shows that its obligation rests upon the Lord's people as long as there are any of them here. It states the task committed to the church throughout all time. Each one of us who is part of the church at any time or place has his own part in fulfilling that assignment. "We are His disciples; we His work must do." To rephrase a famous couplet: "Ours is not to reason why; it is but ours to do or die!"

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“Will the heathen be saved if we do not send them the gospel?” is a question of serious importance; but another of greater importance to me and you is this: “Will I be saved if I do not send it in obedience to the Lord’s command?” One missionary said, “If I knew I would never again have a convert, I would go right ahead and preach the gospel unto all creation.” Another said, “What have we to do with success—we have our marching orders—we must go forward.”

The Lord exercises His power to save through the message of the gospel, and forgives men upon the condition of their faith in it. He has committed to us the task of carrying the message to all sinners. There are no Christians where the gospel has not been carried by men; and, to us, there has been revealed no hope for any to whom its blessed truth is not made known. (See II Thess. 1:7-9). In giving the Great Commission, Christ committed the work of saving the world into the hands of men. Since He has commanded us to do it, we must preach the gospel to all men in order that by being faithful servants of His we might save ourselves. Since it has pleased Him to commit this treasure to earthen vessels (II Cor. 4:7), we must be true to the trust in order to save others. Surely, if we care at all for the Lord’s will, or for our brothers’ welfare, we should be diligent in evangelizing the whole world.

Since Jesus commanded evangelism, we are not Christian if we are not evangelistic, and the work of evangelism is the same work at home and abroad. The logical order is to work at home and near-by fields first (see Acts 1:8), but the Lord also says “into all the world,” “all nations,” “unto every creature,” “unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Any one who doesn’t believe in evangelism on the foreign field doesn’t believe Christ. The Lord seems to desire haste in the establishment of Christian centers throughout the world. There was surely much evangelizing left to do in Judea and Samaria when “the hand of the Lord” promoted the mission work at Antioch. There was much more to be done at Antioch when the Holy Spirit commanded them to send Paul and Barnabas into still other foreign fields. Paul saw and planned to do much more evangelizing that needed to be done in Asia Minor when the Lord led him on to Europe (Acts 16:6-10).

Compelled by the Nature and Truth of the Gospel

If any one does not believe in missions, He does not believe Christ, for Christ commanded it. But if there was no Great Commission, the gospel message itself impels universal evangelism. If it means

anything to us, it must be true. If it is true, it is for all men. The gospel has the same light and salvation to offer to all men. All men are lost in sin (Rom. 3:19-23). "The whole world lieth in the evil one" (I John 5:19). There is only one Savior and plan of salvation (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Christ died for all; His love and saving power are sent forth to all. The Lord is not willing that any should perish (II Pet. 3:9), and He is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34).

The church does not belong to one nation, or race, or class, or age, but is the will of God and the gift of God for all mankind. All men have been made by God, and are responsible to God. All men are in need of the same grace. The gospel is not given to us to keep; but by the very nature of it, if we accept it as true, we accept the obligation to deliver it to others. If we are honest, we will deliver the precious truth to those for whom it is designated. We are too often guilty of criminal neglect in carrying around with us the serum of life but doing nothing for the thousands about us who are dying an eternal death. We look down upon unbelieving, un-Christian nations for their pagan barbarianism, while we live in luxury by embezzling what was consigned to them through us. How like the rich man in Luke 16 is the Christian who knows the gospel but selfishly refuses to share it.

Love and the gospel cross all the barriers and chasms of difference between men. God made the gospel to be universal. Jesus had predicted bringing the Gentiles into the fold to be one flock with the Jews (John 10:16); but the deep-seated Jewish prejudice against Gentiles was not easy to overcome. Barnabas was a good man who could see the grace of God and be glad. He had been one of the first to give his property to the apostles (Acts 4:36, 37), and to receive Saul the persecutor into fellowship after his conversion (Acts 9:27). He and Paul taught these Gentiles to give freely and beforehand to the saints of Judea when the famine was predicted. The nature of the gospel constrains us to overcome our enmities and send it to all men.

Some people do not tell the good news because they have nothing to tell. It is no longer a question whether Christianity is worth spreading; but it may be a question whether your Christianity is worth spreading. The fact that you don't spread it seems to indicate that it is not. A doctrine of doubts or of self-righteousness does not demand telling at any personal sacrifice. But if the gospel of Christ is true, it must be told. If we believe it, we are committed to telling it. If we accept it, we are no longer our own, but are bought with a price.

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We have no life to live but the life of service to Jesus Christ in saving the world from sin.

Certainly, we should give ourselves diligently to missionary work because God has commanded it; because the Holy Spirit directed and blessed the first examples; because the world is lost; because of the worth of a soul; because of the love of the Savior; because of the fact of hell to be avoided; because of the glories of heaven to be gained; because Jesus has the right to full satisfaction with the results of His labors and suffering; because it is the most glorious, permanent, and far-reaching in its effects of any work that we could do. It is the great way, the necessary way, of love and obedience to God, of love and service to men.

Compelled by Need and by Love

To do one's duty is good, and not to be minimized or despised. But to win the world to Christ is more than a duty. It is a privilege. If the church is filled with the Spirit of Christ, and has been imbued with the love of God, it will want to seek and save the lost—everywhere.

Very briefly and incidentally the Book of Acts records time after time the great success of the early missionaries (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:12; 9:31, 35, 42; 11:24; 12:24). The reasons for such uniform success are indicated in the book. "The hand of the Lord was with them" as He had promised (Matt. 28:20), for they were obeying His commission and all its terms. They preached "the word." They did not doubt their message, but testified powerfully the facts, the commandments, the warnings, and the promises of the gospel of Christ. It is the duty of a messenger to guard and preserve the message as well as to deliver it (John 8:31; I Tim. 4:16; II Tim. 1:13; Jude 3; I Tim. 6:20; II John 9). They were diligent and steadfast in prayer as well as in teaching and preaching (Acts 2:42; 4:23-31; 6:4; 12:12; 13:2). They were united in faith and in spirit, able to work together (Acts 4:32, 33; 12:1; cf. John 17:20-21). The multitude of believers carried the good news, not the apostles only (Acts 8:1, 3; 11:19). Moreover, they did not try to shield themselves, serve themselves, or exalt themselves; but they were willing to spend and to be spent in doing what Christ had given them to do. They counted their possessions not their own and their lives as not dear unto themselves (Acts 4:32-37; 20:24; 5:41).

Paul was first sent by the authority of Christ's command. Paul was attracted by the marvelous truth and character of the gospel message. But Paul came to be drawn more and more by the needs

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of men out of Christ, and was constrained by the love of Christ to beseech and entreat men (at all costs to himself) to be reconciled to God. His heart's desire and supplication to God was for the rejectors of the gospel that they might be saved (Rom. 10:1). For their sakes he had great sorrow and unceasing pain in his heart, and could even wish that he himself were anathema from Christ, if by that he could win their salvation (Rom. 9:1-13). When we realize that men out of Christ are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1); "are without God and without hope" (Eph. 2:12); are blind, in darkness in the power of Satan, and need forgiveness of sins (Acts 26:17, 18); do not know God (I Thess. 4:5); have all sinned, and will perish by their sin without the law (Rom. 3:23; 2:12); cannot be saved by their self-righteousness (Rom. 3:19; 10:3, 4); will be punished (II Thess. 1:7-9) and cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15); if we have any love in our hearts, we will eagerly do all we can to reach them with the gospel, which is able to save them all.

Do we love Him enough to go for Him, to speak for Him, to glorify Him and to bring Him His own that He may heal them? If we love Christ, we will keep His commandments (John 14:15).

For Further Study:

See books listed on page 535.