

Objective: What is the Great Commission, and how is it relevant to the life of the believer and of churches?

The words of Jesus to His followers after His resurrection

The phrase “the Great Commission” is applied usually to Jesus’ words in Matthew 28:18-20: “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’”

All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth

Jesus “is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36), and in all things He has the preeminence (Colossians 1:18). If, as churches and believers involve themselves in mission or evangelism or outreach or whatever is the prevalent phrase, and do it without Jesus, it is to no avail.

The mission of other religions does not acknowledge His supremacy and therefore are not doing God’s work. Any branch of Christianity that does not put Christ first in its practices and teachings is not of the work of God. Before His ascension to the Father Christ prophesied “...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me” (Acts 1:8). The work of the Holy Spirit in mission is to lead believers to witness to Jesus Christ.

Reflection

In what ways does the authority of Jesus Christ influence your Christianity?

God Who sends

In Christian circles “mission” has acquired a variety of meanings. Sometimes it has referred to a building, sometimes to a trip to accomplish a ministry task in a foreign country, sometimes to the founding of new churches, etc.

In church history “mission” was a theological term used to describe how God sent the Son and how the Father and the Son sent out the Holy Spirit.

The English word “mission” has a Latin root. It comes from “missio” meaning “I send”. Hence mission refers to what someone or some group is sent to do.

The concept of “sending” is integral to a biblical theology of the nature of God. God is the God Who sends. “Whom shall I send, and will go for Us?” asks the voice of the Lord (Isaiah 6:8). God sent Moses to Pharaoh, Elijah and the other prophets to Israel, John the Baptist to witness to the light of Christ (John 1:6-7), who Himself was sent by the “living Father” for the salvation of the world (4:34; 6:57).

God sends his angels to accomplish His will (Genesis 24:7, Matthew 13:41 and many more), and He sends the Holy Spirit in the name of the Son (John 14:26, 15:26; Luke 24:49). The Father will “send Jesus Christ” at the “times of restoration of all things” (Acts 3:20-21).

Jesus also sent out His disciples (Matthew 10:5), and He explained that just as the Father sent Him into the world so He, Jesus, sends believers into the world (John 17:18). All believers are sent by Christ. We are on a mission for God, and, as such, we are His missionaries. The New Testament church understood this clearly and continued the Father's work of being sent. The book of Acts is a testimony to the work of mission as the gospel spreads throughout the then known world. Believers are like "ambassadors for Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:20), sent to represent Him to all people.

The New Testament church was the church in mission. One of the problems with church today is that church goes regard "mission as one of its many functions rather than its defining centre" (Murray 2004:135). Often they distance themselves from mission by assigning it to "specialized agencies rather than equipping all members as missionaries" (ibid). Instead of Isaiah's response of "Here am I! Send me" (6:9) the often implied response is, "Here am I! Send someone else".

Reflection

Do you see yourself as being sent by God? If so, in what ways?

How does your local congregation live up to being sent into the world?

An Old Testament model

The work of God in the Old Testament is related to the idea of attraction. Other nations would be so startled by the magnetic event of God's interaction with Israel that they would seek to come to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).

The model is one of "Come" as exemplified in the story of Solomon and the queen of Sheba. "Now when the queen of Sheba

heard of the fame...she came to Jerusalem...so Solomon answered all her questions; there was nothing so difficult for the king that he could not explain it to her...she said to the king: 'it was a true report...'" (1 Kings 10:1-7). In this account the concept is one of drawing people to a central point so that truth and answers can be expounded. Some churches practice such a model today. There is some validity to it but it is not a complete model.

Typically Israel is not sent outside its own boundaries to witness to God's glory, "it was not commissioned to go to the nations to explain the revelational truth committed to God's people" (Peters 1972:21). When God wants to send Jonah with a message of repentance to the non-Israelite Ninevites, Jonah is horrified. Such an approach was unheard of (read the mission story in the book of Jonah. It remains instructive for us today).

New Testament models

"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" is how the first gospel writer, Mark, establishes the context of the New Testament church (1:1). Everything is about the gospel, the good news, and Christians are to have their "fellowship in the gospel" (Philippians 1:5), meaning that they live and share the good news of salvation in Christ. This is what the term "evangelism" has its roots in, the idea of spreading the good news, of proclaiming salvation to those who do not believe.

Just as some were occasionally attracted to Israel because of its often short-lived fame, so in contrast many were often attracted to Jesus Christ because of His popular reputation and charisma. "And immediately His fame spread throughout all the region" (Mark 1:28). Jesus said "Come to Me" (Matthew 11:28) and "Follow Me" (9:9). The salvation model of coming and following Jesus Christ is still in force. It is Jesus who has the words of life (John 6:68).

To limit, however, our model of Christianity to just coming and following is to pattern our spirituality along Old Testament lines. Jesus explains more. Those who have come to Him and who are following Him are also sent into the world, as we read in John 17:18. God is the missionary God. In response to being sent, as they go they are to make disciples, baptise and teach the commands of Christ (again Matthew 28: 18-20). Christianity is not a static calling, it is dynamic and active. With Christ we come, follow, are sent and go to continue His work.

Reflection

What models of mission are practiced in your local congregation?

Why mission?

Mark explains that Jesus came, “preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God” (1:14). This kingdom is not exclusive. Jesus told His disciples that “the kingdom of God...is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden: and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches” (Luke 13: 18-19). The idea is that the tree is big enough for all the birds, not just one particular species.

Church is not exclusive, as the assembly was in Israel. It is inclusive, and the gospel message is not just for us. We are to be His witnesses as far as “the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). “God sent forth His Son” for us that we, through redemption, may be adopted as His children (Galatians 4:4). The redemptive mercy of God through Christ is not for us alone, “but for the whole world” (1 John 2:2). We who are God’s children are sent into the world as witnesses of His grace. Mission is God saying “yes” to humanity, “yes, I am here, and yes, I will save you”.

This being sent into the world is not simply a task that is to be completed. It is a

relationship with Jesus, Who sends us to share with others “the goodness of God that leads to repentance” (Romans 2:4). It is Christ’s compassionate *agape* love within us that motivates us to spread the love of God to others. “The love of Christ compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14). Mission begins at home. Everything we do is related to the act of God in sending “forth the Spirit of the Son into our hearts” (Galatians 4:6). We are sent as Christ to our spouses, our families, our parents, our friends, neighbours, workmates, and those we meet in the street, anyone everywhere.

The early church saw its purpose as participation in the great commission. Paul viewed those without “the message of the cross” as being in the process of “perishing” unless the gospel was preached to them (1 Corinthians 1:18). Irrespective of whether or not people respond to the gospel, believers are to be the “fragrance of Christ” wherever they go (2 Corinthians 2:15). Paul is so concerned that people hear the gospel that he comes to regard spreading it as a responsibility. He says “necessity is laid upon me: yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Corinthians 9:16). He suggests he is under an obligation to “Greeks and barbarians, both to wise and to unwise...to preach the gospel” (Romans 1:14-15).

Paul also desires to do the work of Christ out of a sense of hope-filled gratitude “because the love of God has been poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (5:5). For him it is a privilege of grace to be an apostle, meaning “one sent”, as we all are, to do Christ’s work (1:15). “Christianity is missionary by its very nature, or it denies its very *raison d’être*”, meaning the reason why it exists (Bosch 1991, 2000: 9).

Opportunities

Like many of today’s societies, the world at the time of Acts was hostile to the gospel. “We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a

stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23).

The Christian message was not welcome. The faithful, like Paul, were “hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed...perplexed, but not in despair...persecuted but not forsaken” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). Sometimes clusters of believers abandoned the gospel (2 Timothy 1:15).

It was not easy to be sent into the world. Usually most Christians and churches existed somewhere “between danger and opportunity” (Bosch 1991, 2000:1).

It was in recognizing and seizing opportunities that the church began to grow numerically and in spiritual maturity. They were not afraid to be provocative.

The Holy Spirit led believers into opportunities for the gospel. Beginning with Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 the Spirit seized occasions for Christ. These are likened to doors of faith (Acts 14:27; 1 Corinthians 16:9; Colossians 4:3).

Men and women began to be bold for the gospel. People like Philip in Acts 8, and Paul, Silas, Timothy, Aquila and Priscilla in Acts 18 when they planted the church in Corinth. Whatever the believers did, it was as those sent to be “fellow workers” in the gospel (Philippians 4:2).

Just as Jesus Christ was sent to become one of us so humans could be saved, so, for the sake of the gospel, believers were sent to become “all things to all men” in order to share the good news with the whole world (1 Corinthians 9:22).

The book of Acts ends with Paul fulfilling the Great commission of Matthew 28, “preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence” (Acts 28:31). It sets an example for the church of the future – the church in mission.

Reflection

In what ways are you and your congregation engaging the outside world in respect to the gospel?

Describe any connections between the church and mission.

Conclusion

The Great Commission is about the continuation of the gospel work of Christ. We are all sent into the world by Him just as Christ was by the Father. This suggests a church full of active believers, going about their Father’s business.

From the Statement of Beliefs of the Grace Communion International/ Worldwide Church of God UK:

<http://www.wcg.org/lit/aboutus/beliefs/#Church>

The Church

"The Christian is any person who trusts in Jesus Christ. Christians experience new birth through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, embrace their adoption as children of God and enter a right relationship with God and fellow humans by God's grace as they are empowered and led by the Holy Spirit. The Christian's life is characterized by the fruit of the Holy Spirit."

(Romans 10:9-13; Galatians 2:20; John 3:5-7; Titus 3:5; Mark 8:34; John 1:12-13; 3:16-17; Romans 5:1; Romans 8:9, 14-15; John 13:35; Galatians 5:22-23)

Bibliography

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