

Triumph of the Warrior-King:  
A Theology of the Great Commission

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Too many of us think of the Great Commission as little more than Jesus' way of promoting the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering or of marketing the *Jesus* video. With such the case, theologians tend to ignore the Great Commission. After all, they reason, it is a "practical" exhortation, better left to denominational bureaucrats and women's missionary auxiliary leaders. At the same time, missionaries and evangelists tend to ignore theology. After all, what does abstract theorizing have to do with Jesus' ultimate church-wide missions emphasis—the Great Commission? As a result, we are left with theologians who lust more for recognition by the American Academy of Religion than for the global expansion of the gospel. At the same time, far too many missionaries, evangelists, and church planters see themselves as the ecclesial equivalent of the civil service—organizing initiatives and promoting programs. The problem, for both groups, is the eclipse of Jesus in evangelical theology and missiology.

Evangelical Protestants talk tirelessly about the Great Commission, but rarely do we grasp what it means in the cosmic purposes of God in forming a Kingdom for His Messiah. The Scriptures, however, reveal an entirely different vision of the Great Commission. When Jesus announced the Commission to his disciples (Matt 28:16-20), he was not launching a global public relations campaign. He was declaring war. When Jesus grants the Great Commission, he is signaling the onset of the last days—the expansion of

the gospel to the ends of the earth means that God has indeed granted him the nations as his inheritance. Thus, the Great Commission is a decisive stage in the warfare of God against the serpent of Eden. There is nothing programmatic about leading sinners to faith in Christ. Instead the expansion of global missions represents the plundering of the kingdom of Satan (Mark 3:27; John 12:31-32; 2 Tim 2:25-26). The embrace of the gospel by sinners is more than just persuasion; it is the kingly activity of Jesus as the Son of David calling together a “flock” over which he rules as Shepherd (John 10:15-16; cf. Ezek 37:24).

The Great Commission points to faith in Christ and the forgiveness of sins as the vehicle for cosmic restoration and the salvation of the world. Those reconciled to God through Christ are receiving more than personal freedom from guilt—they are becoming “sons of God” who share with Jesus in an inheritance that includes the entire created order (Ps 89; Rom 4:13, 8:15-17; Gal 3:27-4:7). The Great Commission is a theology of cosmic warfare—a theology centering on the unveiling of the long-hidden mystery of Christ and his church. It means the overthrow of the ancient powers that have long held the creation captive through sin and death. It means the triumph of a resurrected Messiah over every principality and power hostile to the reign of the Creator. It means that God is keeping his promises to his anointed King. It means war.

### **The Great Commission and the Reign of Death**

There was no Israelite Mission Board. Instead, the old covenant looked forward to the day when the nations would see the vindication of Israel—when Israel would be raised from the dead and cleansed from all sin (Ezek 36:33-36). “My dwelling place will be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people,” Yahweh spoke

through the prophet Ezekiel. “Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctified Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore” (Ezek 37:27-28 ESV). Israel therefore longed for the day when the ancient promises would be fulfilled, when the nations would come to Israel (Isaiah 60:1-14), when the ends of the earth would be given as an inheritance to the Son of David (Ps 2:8-9; Ps 110:1-7). This would mean the reign of the Spirit-anointed King, the dawning of the messianic age (Isaiah 11:1-12), the kingdom of God. This is why the apostles inquire of the resurrected Jesus as to whether this was when he would “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6 ESV). Jesus answers their question by speaking of the power of the Spirit and the global task of the Great Commission (Acts 1:7-8). He was not changing the subject.

To understand the radical theology of the Great Commission, one must grasp the root problem—the tyranny of the demonic “principalities and powers” over the created order, created by Yahweh for his glory. As C.S. Lewis explained it:

One of the things that surprised me when I first read the New Testament seriously was that it talked so much about a Dark Power in the universe—a mighty evil spirit who was held to be the Power behind death and disease, and sin. The difference is that Christianity thinks this Dark Power was created by God, and was good when he was created, and went wrong. Christianity agrees with Dualism that this universe is at war. But it does not think this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel. Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is.<sup>1</sup>

This “enemy occupation” of the cosmos came through the deception of God’s appointed king—the man Adam who was given dominion over the creation (Gen 1:26-30; Ps 8:3-9). Because the human king surrendered his dominion to the Serpent-Conqueror, the creation is now in rebellion against its rightful rulers—the sons of man

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 36.

(Gen 3:16-19; Rom 8:19-23). Therefore, the creation is under bondage to Satan because the creation's anointed rulers share a nature with the Evil One, the despotic "father" they have chosen for themselves (John 8:43-47; Eph 2:2-3). In order to restore human rule over the cosmos, the Serpent must be defeated by a human being (Gen 3:15; Rev 12:5)—a human being who can destroy the satanic power over humanity, which is the guilt of sin and the curse of death (Heb 2:14-15). This is why Jesus confronts the demonic powers in his earthly ministry, why he demonstrates his authority over nature, and why he speaks of his crucifixion as the casting out of the ruler of this age (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).<sup>2</sup> As the church father Irenaeus noted, the humanity of Jesus is the fulfillment of our race's "war against the enemy." As such, Irenaeus contended, from the moment of Jesus' conception, he was "watching the head" of the Serpent—waiting to crush it beneath his feet.<sup>3</sup>

The Great Commission requires cultural contextualization—a task seen already in the apostolic ministry of the apostle Paul (1 Cor 9:15-23). And yet a theologically informed missiology understands that there are some aspects of human nature that transcend culture, rooted as they are in the creation and fall of humanity. The idolatries of racial supremacy fall before the New Testament's insistence on the unity of the human race in Adam (Acts 17:26). The missionary-evangelist further knows that all persons in

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<sup>2</sup> Erich Sauer thus explains the centrality of Jesus' mission as Second Adam and head of the new humanity: "Christ accomplished down here the work which the Father also gave Him to do as the Son of *Man*. As *man* He once wore the crown of thorns, which the soil, unredeemed and under the curse, yielded Him, and as *man* He will on the day of cosmic regeneration (Matt 19:28), as the Head of His body, reign with all His saints over the same soil—now redeemed and free from the curse. The *Divine Redeemer* became *man* and as such redeemed mankind, the ruler of the earth, and bound him to Himself in an eternal, inseparable oneness, and *thus* at the same time effected the redemption of the earth." Erich Sauer, *The King of the Earth: The Nobility of Man According to the Bible and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 98.

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 548.

all cultures have a real knowledge of God—a knowledge they universally suppress in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18-32).<sup>4</sup> “Evil must rationalize, and that is its weakness,” notes philosopher J. Budziszewski. “But it can, and that is its strength.”<sup>5</sup> The missionary-evangelist knows that all persons in every culture know the objective standards of morality, and that all of them experience the indictments of the conscience for sin (Rom 2:14-16). The missionary-evangelist knows that all persons in every culture, whatever they do to deny it, fear death and the judgment to follow (Heb 2:14-15). This means that the message of the gospel across all cultures will address the common human plight of sin, righteousness, and judgment—the proclamation through which the Holy Spirit pierces consciences (John 16:8-11).

This means that a theology of the Great Commission recognizes that human hostility to the gospel is not primarily intellectual but moral. “And this is judgment,” the gospel of John proclaims. “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light for their deeds were evil” (John 3:19 ESV). The gospel, by its very nature, is threatening to the cherished autonomy of the sinner. But this understanding also means that missionaries and evangelists will not abandon a people group, simply because they are initially unresponsive to the gospel—as though the gospel can be tested on a “focus group” of disinterested consumers. Instead, a theology of the Great Commission understands that the problem of all persons—whether in Albania or Alabama—is captivity to the deception of the Evil One (2 Tim 2:25), a captivity that is

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the nature of this knowledge of God found in general revelation and in the *imago Dei*, see Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 2 (Waco: Word, 1976; reprint, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 91-150.

<sup>5</sup> J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of Conscience: Politics and the Fall of Man* (Dallas: Spence, 1999), 35.

overcome by the unabashed proclamation of the gospel (2 Cor 4:4-6). A biblical theology of the Great Commission sees gospel preaching as what it is—spiritual warfare.

And unregenerate humanity knows this—at some level. This is why warfare myths—from *Beowulf* to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*—resonate with unbelievers. They don't know what is going on, but they sense that something more than meets the eye is in the air; that behind it all there is some ancient conspiracy. They try to quell it with bodily pleasure, mental diversions, and selfish ambitions. But somewhere behind it all, they seem to know there is a mystery stirring.

### **The Great Commission and the Atonement of Christ**

God's purpose is not just the rescue of some human beings, but also the restoration of human rule by conforming believers "to the image of his Son so that he would be the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:29 NASB). Jesus' death, resurrection, and his subsequent calling of sinners to repentance is presented in strikingly cosmic terms, with human redemption seen as within "a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens, and things on the earth" (Eph 1:10 NASB). Nowhere is the Christ-centered nature of redemption seen more clearly than in the content of Great Commission proclamation itself—the message of the crucified and resurrected Messiah (1 Cor 15:3-4), who bears the wrath of God in the place of sinners.<sup>6</sup>

The centrality of Christ in the accomplishment of redemption establishes both the universal scope of the mission of Christ and the freeness of the gospel offer, seen in the way Jesus is called the Savior of "the world," literally the entire cosmos (John 3:16-17).

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<sup>6</sup> For a defense of the atonement as penal and substitutionary, see Paige Patterson, "Reflections on the Atonement," *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1989): 307-20.

The universal scope of the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world further grounds the global and cosmic nature of the Great Commission. Some Christian theologians have tended to abstract the atonement from Christ himself—as though the atonement were simply a strictly commercial transaction of so-much wrath for so-much sin.<sup>7</sup> And yet, the New Testament presents propitiation more specifically in terms of the sinner’s union with Christ as his substitute and representative.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the apostle John writes: “And *He Himself* is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2 NKJV, emphasis added). This does not result in universalism precisely because the benefits of the atonement come only through union with Christ the covenant king. Believers, before they came to faith, were not justified before God, and their sins were not seen as propitiated—even though no one disputes that Jesus objectively died for them. Instead, Scripture writes, we too were “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph 2:2 ESV). Jesus propitiates the wrath of God in his sacrifice, but the benefits of this propitiation become the believer’s when he comes into union with Christ through belief in the gospel. This faith union is the transition from condemnation to righteousness, from wrath to grace, from the dominion of Satan to the kingdom of Christ (Col 1:13-14).<sup>9</sup> Theologian Bruce Demarest correctly

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<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the treatment of the extent of the atonement presented by the first writing Southern Baptist theologian, John L. Dagg. See Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1857), 324-31.

<sup>8</sup> For an excellent analysis of this emphasis in the thought of John Calvin, see Kevin Dixon Kennedy, *Union with Christ and the Extent of the Atonement in Calvin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

<sup>9</sup> This is contra the “double payment” objection offered by Puritan John Owen in his classic defense of limited atonement, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984). Owen does not take into sufficient account the issue of union with Christ in the application of the benefits of the atonement.

concludes that “by divine *intention* Christ’s suffering and death are universal in its provision and particular in its application.”<sup>10</sup>

The cosmic scope of the atonement is a double-edged sword. Jesus grounds the free offer of the gospel in the fact that “all is ready” (Luke 14:16-17). The apostles do not simply instruct unbelievers that if they believe in something that may or may not be true (that Jesus died for their sins), then they will find it to be true after all. Instead, the apostles plead with *all* unbelievers to come to Christ (that is, to abandon all other hope of salvation except in the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus) on the basis of the provision of the atonement (Acts 2:40; 2 Cor 5:20). Indeed, the apostles do not just *invite* all people to come to Christ—with no conditions except repentance and faith; they *command* all people to do so (Acts 17:30-31).<sup>11</sup> Those who refuse to come to Christ insist on standing before God without a Mediator. Thus, they bear their own sins (Num 18:22; John 3:18), and receive a heightened condemnation as those who have “trampled” the blood of Christ (Heb 10:26-31). The freeness of the gospel offer means that Great Commission Christians must crucify any hesitation to proclaim the gospel to any sinner

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<sup>10</sup> Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1997), 193. For a similar treatment of the extent of the atonement issue, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 841-58.

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between the design of the atonement and the free offer of the gospel, see John Thornbury, “God’s Universal Call to Men,” *Reformation and Revival Journal* 2 (1993): 99-113. While this author might emphasize more than Thornbury the universal aspects of the design of the atonement, the article masterfully defends a free offer based on the infinite value of the atonement of Christ. Thornbury writes of his personal transition from the atonement theology of John Gill to his current view: “When I was entrenched in the system I had great difficulty preaching to sinners, particularly with any fervor or pathos. But in the providence of God I came upon a treatise of Andrew Fuller titled *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. In this Fuller shows that the gospel does not address people as elect and non-elect but simply as sinners. The gospel is therefore a mandate to all indiscriminately to leave the paths of sin and lay hold of Christ. Hence it is the duty of all to seek forgiveness through the shed blood of Jesus which is sufficient for the whole world.” The reference to Fuller is important, since Fuller’s recovery of the free offer of the gospel and the duty for all to believe is what sparked the Great Commission vision of William Carey, and thus launched the modern mission movement.

in any place at any time. The gospel of the apostles is not offered only to the elect, but to all sinners without distinction.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Jesus and the apostle Paul call on Christians to plead with persuasion and urgency for all sinners—on behalf of Christ himself—to be reconciled to God through the atoning mission of Jesus (2 Cor 5:17-20).

The resurrection establishes the authority and the power Jesus delegates to the church in the Great Commission task. The resurrection of Jesus means that he is the righteous One (Dan 12:2-3). He is the true Israel, who has been raised from the dead (Ezek 37:13-14). He is the propitiation of Yahweh's wrath against rebellious humanity. He has been vindicated as the anointed human king of the cosmos (Rom 1:2-4). This is why the resurrection is so pivotal in the apostolic preaching of the Great Commission, so much so that Paul is said to be preaching "Jesus and the resurrection" when he stirred the crowds in Athens (Acts 17:18). The apostle Peter sounds less like a television evangelist and more like a military strategist at Pentecost and beyond. The resurrection of Jesus is good news for Israel (Acts 13:30-32) but very bad news for the cosmic powers and their allies (Acts 2:22-36; 1 Pet 3:21-22). "The resurrection constitutes Jesus as the world's true sovereign, the 'son of god' who claims absolute allegiance from everyone and everything within creation," notes biblical scholar N.T. Wright. "He is the start of the creator's new world: its pilot project, indeed its pilot."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The New Hampshire Baptist Confession of Faith (1833) contains a succinct and powerful expression of this biblical truth in its article "On the Freeness of Salvation." The confession states: "That the blessings of salvation are made free to all by the gospel; that it is the immediate duty of all to accept them by a cordial, and obedient faith; and that nothing prevents the salvation of the greatest sinner on earth except his own voluntary refusal to submit to the Lord Jesus Christ, which refusal will subject him to an aggravated condemnation."

<sup>13</sup> N.T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 576.

The apostolic preaching of the cross is indeed necessary for the Great Commission mandate. But the preaching of a penal substitutionary atonement without the bodily resurrection of Jesus is to no avail (1 Cor 15:15-19). Those who come to Jesus for salvation, the Scriptures testify, must “believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead” in order to be saved (Rom 10:9 ESV). This is not simply some sort of test of faith—as though one must believe a seemingly unbelievable miracle in order to “prove” that one is really trusting in Christ. Instead, believing in the resurrection is part of what it *means* to trust Christ. The believer counts the crucifixion of Messiah as the penalty for his sin—and he counts the resurrection of Messiah as his acceptance before the Father. The resurrection is for Jesus the transition from sin-bearing substitute—under the wrath of God—to the vindicated substitute inheriting the blessing of God.<sup>14</sup> When the believer is united with Jesus in his resurrection, his life is now “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).

This resurrection focus of faith is seen perhaps most clearly in the interchange between Jesus and Martha after the death of Lazarus. When Jesus mentions the resurrection, Martha turns her attention to the eschaton—when the graves of the righteous are opened. Jesus proclaims: “I am the resurrection” (John 11:25), before asking Martha the most soul-penetrating question she had ever heard—“Do you believe this (John 11:26)?” Through his Body the church, Jesus now asks the same question of every sinner on the planet.

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<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the resurrection as the “justification” of Jesus as the righteous new humanity, see Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 116.

Union with Jesus in crucifixion and resurrection is seen also in the baptism mandate of Jesus in the Great Commission. The church is to make disciples of all nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19b ESV). Baptism is not a bare *Bar Mitzvah* of initiation into Christianity. It is not accidental that baptism is done with water—the element of the wrath of God in the flood judgment of the world (1 Pet 3:20-21) and the element of the seas, which in the Old Testament represent chaos and hostility to the Creator.<sup>15</sup> Jesus speaks of his death under the curse of God as a “baptism” he must undergo (Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50). The apostle Paul speaks of the Old Testament Israelites as “baptized” when they passed safely through the waters of judgment (1 Cor 10:1-2). In the new covenant, baptism signifies the burial of the believer with Jesus in the chaotic waters of death and the resurrection of the believer with Jesus from grips of the grave (Rom 6:3-9). As such, baptism is itself a call to battle. When believers from every nation go down into the waters, they appeal to God for rescue from the condemnation of the “angels, authorities, and powers” which have been swept away by the resurrection triumph of the warrior Messiah (1 Pet 3:21-22).

### **The Great Commission and the Obedience of Faith**

This redemptive plan focuses on the glory of God, but not in an abstract, self-focused sense. Instead, the glory of God finds its expression in the incarnation, atonement, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth. The entire sweep of redemptive history finds its goal in the glory of God *in Christ*. God is glorified when his messianic king is recognized as the rightful governor of the entire created universe (Phil 2:7-11). For this

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<sup>15</sup> This is true from the opening words of Scripture when the Creator Spirit hovers over “the waters” of “the deep” in the formless and void earth. The Old Testament prophets speak of the cosmic warfare as a struggle between God and “the sea” or “the sea dragon” (see, for instance, Isaiah 27:1). And in the final New Jerusalem in the new earth, the apostle John reveals that “the sea was no more” (Rev 21:1 ESV).

reason, the apostle Peter is able to speak of God’s glory as focused particularly on the Kingdom inheritance of Jesus as Messiah (1 Pet 4:11), a doxological theme that is in line with Old Testament messianic promise (Ps 2:4-12; 110:1-7). In the new covenant, God unveils the identity of the redemptive focus—Jesus of Nazareth, and commands all nations to surrender to his kingship.

This Christocentric focus of the Great Commission is imperiled as perhaps never before. Religious pluralism, now rampant in mainline denominations, insists that Christ is one path, among many possible paths, to the divine.<sup>16</sup> More subtle, and thus more deadly to the Great Commission fervor of the church, is the emergence among so-called evangelical theologians and missionaries of “inclusivism”—the idea that persons may be saved through Christ without explicit faith in him.<sup>17</sup> Some argue that the unevangelized may express faith through the testimony of general revelation. Others argue that the Spirit is at work in the other world religions, with an agenda of his own that is wider than the mission of Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Still others appeal to the example of Old Testament believers, who were saved without knowing the name of Jesus, as hope for the salvation of those who never hear the gospel. Some missiological fads seek to “build bridges” with existing world religions as “preparation for the gospel”—with some even suggesting such things as evangelizing Muslims with the proclamation that “Allah became flesh and dwelt

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> For a sketch of inclusivist arguments, see Clark H. Pinnock, “Toward a More Inclusive Eschatology,” in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Essays on Eschatology*, ed. David W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 249-62. For a critique of the position, see Ronald H. Nash, *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Molly Truman Marshall, *Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2003); Amos Yong, *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

among us.” And, of course, many of our churches are filled with the popular notion that it would be “unfair” of God to condemn someone who was never confronted with the gospel.<sup>19</sup>

Such notions cut the heart out of the Great Commission, both in terms of its urgency and its focus on the kingship of Christ. After the ascension of Jesus, it would have been quite uncomplicated for the apostles to call for Jews to hope in the future messianic empire, consistent with Old Testament prophetic hope. The apostles could have warned their contemporaries that their works or tribal identities could not save them. They could have pointed to the righteousness of an unnamed Davidic Messiah as the source of salvation. And yet, their commission from Jesus would not allow for generic sincerity, or even “faith” in a generic Christ. The Book of Acts explodes with a passionate call for explicit faith in “this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). This is precisely what Jesus meant when he compared salvation to Moses’ lifting up the bronze serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14-15). Even as the Israelites saved from the venomous bites were to look to the emblem, so must those rescued from the death-bite of the serpent of Eden look in faith to this particular One who was sacrificed outside the gates of Jerusalem.

But what if, one may ask, the hypothetical “man on an island” acknowledges the Creator God revealed in general revelation, and is convicted by the Spirit of sin—a sin uncovered by the law written on his heart? What if he then throws himself on the mercy

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<sup>19</sup> For a more in-depth exploration of this issue, see Russell D. Moore, “The Man on the Island and the Gospel of Grace: Facing the Truth About Those Who Never Hear the Gospel,” [http://www.henryinstitute.org/documents/The\\_Man\\_on\\_the\\_Island.pdf](http://www.henryinstitute.org/documents/The_Man_on_the_Island.pdf).

of this God for forgiveness?<sup>20</sup> This is somewhat like asking whether someone would need to call on Christ if the individual never sins and perfectly obeys the law of God. Such a situation *never* happens. The apostle Paul anticipates such questions, and answers them decisively—one cannot call on Christ without faith, one cannot come to faith without preaching, and one cannot hear preaching unless the church is faithful to the Great Commission (Rom 10:14-17).

The Spirit does not work independently of God’s purpose to glorify Christ through the new covenant witness of the church. It is not unusual that Jesus should tell his disciples that the mission of the Spirit is to testify to his messianic identity, and to glorify him (John 15:26; 16:14), if in fact the goal of God’s Kingdom purposes is to see to it that Christ “will come to have first place in everything” (Col 1:18). Calling on Jesus as Lord is not a hoop through which one jumps to reach the goal of eternal life—Jesus himself is eternal life; the confession of Jesus as lord is the goal (Phil 2:9-11). A “sinner’s prayer” is a part of coming to faith in Christ, but it is not a formula. The confession of Jesus as lord is an acknowledgment that Jesus is the Creator God who alone can save (Isaiah 45:23; Rom 10:9). It is the sinner bending the knee before the tribunal of God and confessing in the present what one day the entire creation will acknowledge—that Jesus of Nazareth is the just and righteous ruler of the cosmos.

That is why the Great Commission focuses on the identity and mission of Jesus—and why that stirs such controversy from first-century Jerusalem to twenty-first century Baghdad. And that is why the evangelistic task of the church must focus on Christ—not simply on avoiding hell or healing one’s marriage or finding purpose in one’s life. This is

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<sup>20</sup> This is the possibility mentioned by Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved? The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 143-58.

also why the Great Commission centers on preaching and teaching. In the Commission, the proclamation of the gospel comes with the authority of Jesus himself—and the Bible promises that the Spirit will convict of sin through the preaching of the Scriptures (1 Cor 1:18-25). Effective and compassionate social ministry is part of the Great Commission (Matt 25:31-46), but a social ministry that dispenses with gospel proclamation is no longer Christian. In the same vein, videos, musicals, and dramatic presentations may have their place, but they do not carry with them the authority of Jesus—an authority that is present every time the oracles of God are proclaimed in simplicity and in truth.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Great Commission and the Community of the Kingdom**

A theology of the Great Commission is inextricably tied up with a theology of the church. King Jesus, after all, commands the believing community to baptize the nations, and to plant congregations across the planet. Contemporary evangelicals seem to recognize at least this much. What is often missed, however, is the *authority* Christ grants to his church in the Great Commission. At the calling of the apostle Paul, Jesus does not say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting a voluntary association that mentions me in their constitution and by-laws?” Instead, he asks, “Why are you persecuting *me*?” (Acts 9:5, emphasis added). The New Testament presents the union of the head and his body as a mysterious “one-flesh” union (Eph 5:31-32). What is true of the one is to be true of the other (Matt 18:18-20; cf. Isaiah 22:22). This means that the church is to mirror the mission of Jesus in seeking the salvation of the world (Matt 18:10-14). A non-

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<sup>21</sup> Edmund Clowney offers a helpful corrective to the temptation to rely on dramatic gospel presentations as somehow “more effective” than direct proclamation in evangelism. “An actor pleads with the viewer to come to *him* and to trust in *him*,” Clowney notes. But the actor is not Jesus. Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 49. In the proclaimed word, however, whether in public preaching or personal verbal witness, the oracles of God, inspired by the Spirit of Christ, actually do speak with the voice of Jesus Himself.

evangelistic church is more than just a disobedient body (although it is that). A non-evangelistic church is denying before the nations that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. And that is blasphemy.

The church, however, is to throb with the same evangelistic fervor that fuels its king—and to call, with his authority, the nations to surrender before his coming global reign. Thus, the apostle John sees the universal invitation to Christ coming not only from Jesus, but also from his Spirit and his Bride, the church (Rev 22:16-17). A church that is not enflamed for evangelism, missions, and church growth is not just practically ineffective—it is theologically anemic. A church that prizes itself on its pristine confessional statements, but is not seeing sinners converted to Christ and is not fueling the global missions endeavor, has a defective Christology. It may have some cognitive knowledge of the attributes of God or the *ordo salutis*, but a church that does not long for the expansion of the name of Christ to the nations is at cross-purposes with the Father God (Ps 2:8).

A non-evangelistic church is also in the midst of an identity crisis. This is precisely because the Great Commission is not a “program” of a voluntary association. Instead the Bible presents both the church and the Great Commission as parts of the sweeping and awe-inspiring unveiling of the mystery of Christ. This is clear in the apostle Paul’s appeal for the Roman church’s support for the mission to the Gentiles—an appeal we know as the Book of Romans. Paul did not nag or prod the church to grudgingly fulfill a duty. Instead, he pointed them to the climactic eschatological nature of their very existence as the purpose for a global missions thrust. The advance of the gospel is “the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and

through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith” (Rom 16:25-26). A congregation that is not ignited for the salvation of the nations doesn’t know what time it is. This is because the New Testament concept of the church is not that of a place to encourage one another in discipleship and to pool together missions offerings. It is a declaration of war. In the church, the triumphant Warrior-King has established an outpost of the Kingdom—a colony of the reign that will one day engulf the world (Eph 1:20-23).<sup>22</sup> The New Testament presents the church as a sign to the demonic powers—a sign of their doom (Eph 3:10). This is specifically true in terms of the reconciliation experienced within the church between Jews and Gentiles as the one people of God (Eph 3:6). This is because the gathering of a unified flock means the defeat of the wolves, and the triumph of the shepherd-king. Preaching to the Gentiles is bringing to light the mystery hidden for ages (Eph 3:1-10; Acts 15:14-17), precisely because it is the onset of the triumph of the Kingdom (Rom 8:19-23).

This means that the focus of the church, both in terms of theological conviction and missiological action, ought to center on the Great Commission. But this Great Commission vision is rooted in a *theology* of the purposes of God and the mystery of Christ. We have forgotten the big picture. This is why churches that seek to minimize theology cannot long sustain Great Commission. This is why so many churches—large and small, “traditional” and “contemporary”—are so irrelevant, and frankly boring. This is why contemporary gospel ministers too often resemble more attendees at an insurance

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<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between Jesus’ future role as ruler of the universe and his present role as ruler of the church, see Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 146-52

sales convention rather than pioneers of a coming global empire. The watching world should identify local congregations as globally engaged in evangelism. Churches should cultivate peace and unity within the congregation—not just to maintain order, but also to herald the coming kingdom of Christ. Rather than planting congregations based around common interests (for example, “cowboy churches” or, more commonly, churches geared toward upwardly mobile young couples), churches should intentionally seek to manifest a commonality in the Spirit of the risen Christ (Gal 6:12-15), not in shared tribal identity or economic status. What would a Jewish-Palestinian Christian congregation on the West Bank say about the gospel? What would a racially mixed congregation in South Africa demonstrate about the triumph of Christ? What would it mean for the Great Commission if a high-powered Wall Street church looked to the leadership of a godly, Spirit-gifted layman, who also happened to be a public school janitor (Jas 2:1-6)? Such things would say precisely what was said in the first-century when uncircumcised Gentiles took up offerings to aid their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom 15:22-28). It would say: “Jesus is lord.” And human beings aren’t the only ones watching.

### **Conclusion**

Demonic powers don’t tremble before denominational programs or bureaucratic public relations campaigns. What they fear is something more ancient, more mysterious, and more personal. What they fear is not a program, but a person—with a name, an authority, and an inheritance. Since the church bears the Spirit of the Anointed One (1 Pet 4:14), the satanic powers lash out violently against it (John 15:25-16:11). Their question to the missionary advance of the church is the same question they once voiced to the church’s King in his hometown synagogue: “Have you come to destroy us?” When the

church is faithful to the commission of its Warrior-King, the answer is heard by an expectant creation even when it is not voiced—“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Rom 16:20). And that is what Jesus would call “good news.”