

The Great Omission of the Great Commission

Rev. Jim Dowdy

Matthew 28:18-20

July 13, 2014

I want to make you aware that we want to have the opportunity for each of you to give to our missionaries, in addition to the offerings that we'll be giving them from the church. We will take a love offering for them afterwards. Often, actually regularly, we have The Lord's Supper once a month, and when we do we have an additional offering at the end to give to those in need in the congregation, and outside of it. Today, as we have these missionaries serving us this weekend, we think it is appropriate that at the end of the service you have the opportunity to give out of your joy, and what you've received, to them and their ministry. We'll divide the offering equally among them, and you know they've made sacrifices to be here. We're so delighted that they have come to share with us.

Our speaker this morning is Reverend Jim Dowdy. Jim is a graduate of the Prairie Bible Institute and The Master's Seminary. He and his wife Carolyn, after they married, began an inner city ministry in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for a number of years. They moved to Mexico in the first stint, from 1980-1988 they were in Mexico. During that time they were serving with Child Evangelists and Fellowship. They had brief stopovers in Pennsylvania and Indiana, and then Jim served as pastor/teacher of Grace Bible Church in Richmond, Virginia from 1992-2005. During that time he pastored our own Karl and Ruth Reilmann, and Krista, and Rachel. Rachel Lundy, that you'll hear about, from time to time you see prayer requests for the Lundys. Rachel is their daughter, and so they were all benefitted from Jim and Carolyn, the ministry of the Gospel in Richmond. Since 2007, they have been in Mexico City, where Jim is on the faculty of Word of Grace Bible Seminary, teaching men to minister the word of God correctly, and effectively, there in Mexico City. They also have served in ministries of local churches. The last number of years they have been working with Neza Christian Church in Neza, which is Mexico City's second largest suburb. Mexico City has 24 million people, and Neza, the suburb, has 1.4 million. It's kind of hard to imagine that, isn't it? So anyway, Jim has been serving there, and we were blessed to hear from him last night, and we are looking forward to what God has on his heart this morning. Jim, come and break the word of life for us.

Thank you, Pastor Ty, for that gracious introduction. What a joy it is for us to be here with you this weekend again. I have to say that your hospitality is very warm, and very gracious. Thank you so much for that. It is so meaningful to us. Thank

you for your participation and partnership in the Gospel around the world, that it is important to you.

I thought that it might be important on such a morning as this to actually promote a missionary book, not written by me, but found in your library here in the foyer. As you come in, there is this little book called Five Pioneer Missionaries. Among these missionaries is Henry Martyn, John Paton, and David Brainerd, and on the back it says:

Recognizing that Jesus Christ was the missionary sent by the Father, and that the Bible is the magna carta of missions. Men like these left home, left family, and love for the sake of Christ, to spread His good news around the world.

You need to be reading books like this, not only as adults, but you need to be introducing them to your children. If you would have asked my wife or I when we were ages 9 or 10 what we wanted to be or do when we grew up, I think both of us would have responded immediately, and resoundingly, “We want to be missionaries.” I think that was in large part a result of the fact that both of our families, both of our parents, regularly received the missionaries into our home, or they provided them hospitality, they spoke in our churches, we were introduced to them. So it is important for us to be introduced to the great, historical missionaries, and missionary work, over the last 2,000 years. I would encourage you to get this little book, and to begin to read it, and teach it to your children.

Professor and Director of Missions at Southern Seminary, David Sills, in his excellent book entitled, Reaching and Teaching, writes about the church in China, and I quote, he said:

All is not as well as we might hope. China’s church is hurting in many ways because of the dearth of theologically-trained leaders. Missionaries report that evangelicals in China are losing 10,000 house churches every year to cults because the church leaders have no theological training. They cannot teach or defend what Orthodox Christianity holds to be true.

Missionaries report similar concerns, not only from Asia, but also from Africa, and Latin America. For example, missionary John Stam reports that:

Big sectors of the Latin American church seem to stagger from one shallow, sensational fad to another. For a while it was ‘name it and claim it’, or

'holy laughter and spiritual warfare'. Then after that came the 'health and wealth gospel' along with the 'theology of prosperity'.

He writes that:

Knocking people to the floor is very popular as is the latest novelty of naming apostles.

This is certainly an accurate description of the evangelical church in many parts of Mexico. He also writes that:

The Gospel entered into Nigeria some 200 years ago. Nigeria today has about 8,500 churches and some 4,000 pastors, yet animism...

Animism is the belief that souls exist not only in human beings, but also in animals, and plants, and rocks, and mountains, and rivers.

...animism still reigns in the hearts of most Nigerian Christians.

One missionary to Nigeria writes:

Many Nigerian churches are so far from the truth that the truth is very hard to find.

David Sills notes that:

Many Christian churches throughout Latin America, Sub-Sahara Africa, and Southeast Asia, have largely departed from the use of the Bible as their only rule of faith in practice such that many such churches can no longer consider to be Orthodox Christian churches.

I believe that one of the primary reasons that this tragedy has occurred, and is occurring is because over the past number of decades, many missionaries, many missionary efforts have largely omitted from the Great Commission, the command to make disciples by teaching them the whole counsel of God. The church and its missionaries have ought too often interpreted the Great Commission as only an evangelistic mandate, rather than what it really is, a discipleship mandate. And in a relatively new, and alarming development, many Christian churches, and evangelical missionaries around the world are turning the Great Commission into

primarily a social justice mandate, or even a mercy ministry mandate, rather than a discipleship mandate.

So, what I would like for us to do this morning is to reexamine briefly the meaning of the Great Commission, and then discuss a number of important implications of this for the church, and its mission. So I invite you to turn in your Bibles to Matthew 28. Matthew 28, perhaps the most well-known of the commissions in the Gospels. I want to read for us Verses 18-20.

Matthew 28:18-20 ~ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Now as we get started here in our study, I think that it is very important for us to be reminded of the nature of the four Gospels. In the four Gospels, we find at the beginning of these Gospels, the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is then followed by His arrest, His crucifixion, His burial, His resurrection, and after all of those important events, all of the Gospels then record this commission of the Lord Jesus Christ, to His disciples, to go into all of the world. So this commission that the Lord Jesus Christ leaves with His church is very important. As a result of His life and ministry, as a result of His crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, as a result of His ascension into Heaven, He charges His church, ***Go into all of the world and preach the gospel to every creature.*** Not only do the Gospels culminate in this Great Commission, but beginning in Acts 1:8, everything in Acts flows from this Great Commission. So really this Great Commission stands as a highlight in the New Testament for the church, as we see the mission, and the mandate that God has given to His church.

First of all, I would like for us to look at the activity of making disciples in Verses 19-20. Although we are inclined to see a number of commands here in Verses 19-20, for example we are inclined to see ‘go’, ‘make disciples’, ‘baptize’, and ‘teach’. The commission here contains only one imperative, and that imperative is found in the words ‘make disciples of all nations’. Jesus’ disciples are told to do what He did, and that is to make disciples. Surrounding this single command, there are three participles that provide us with insight both into the circumstances in which disciple-making is to take place, as well as giving us the characteristics of disciple-making.

So first of all, let's look at the circumstances of making disciples. The first participle that you see there in Verse 19 is translated by the simple word 'go'. Of course this word 'go' modifies the command to make disciples by detailing the circumstances in which the church is to make disciples. The idea is that disciple-making will take place as the church is going. It speaks of the church making disciples as a part of its normal, ongoing ministry operations, but the kind of participle used here indicates that it has some kind of an imperatival force. In other words, the going is not just an incidental matter, as if the Lord Jesus Christ were saying, "You know, whenever you go on your vacation, try to make a few disciples." It's not that kind of meaning. Rather, the Lord was clearly directing His disciples to go somewhere, as an action that had to take place prior to fulfilling the main command of making disciples. That Christ followers are commanded to make disciples of all of the nations certainly means that they would have to go to those nations. There is to be an intentionality to our going to the nations, and of course this is confirmed by Mark's Gospel, by Luke and John, and the book of Acts as well. For example, Luke says that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed to all nations, Chapter 24:7. And then Luke adds, in Acts 1:8:

Acts 1:8 ~ ... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

So the aim of Jesus' disciples is to make disciples of all men everywhere without distinction. Just go to the nations, go everywhere, preach the Gospel, and make disciples. So the circumstances of making disciples is, as the church is going to the nations, and as the church is preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But let's look in second place at the characteristics of making disciples. There are two more participles used in these verses that reveal the characteristics of disciple-making. Look back there at your text, the first characteristic of disciple-making is that disciples are what? They are baptized. Disciples are baptized. Baptizing implies that there has been repentance and forgiveness of sin. Conversion to Christ meant incorporation into the Christian community, and baptism symbolizes that as being a part of the body of Christ. In baptism, the disciple publicly shows his faith in the crucified, buried, and risen Savior, and he publicly shows his union with Christ, in death to sin, and resurrection to a new life. The New Testament can scarcely conceive of an unbaptized disciple of Jesus Christ. It just cannot conceive of that. Disciples are baptized. Jesus' disciples follow the Lord in water baptism, by emersion, in the name of the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The second characteristic of disciple-making is that disciple is instructed in the truths and teachings of the Master. Look back there at the text, *...teaching them to observe* (or to obey) *all that I have commanded you*. When Jesus employs the word ‘teaching’ here, He is making it very clear that He has more in mind than initial evangelism, and an initial response to the Gospel. The kind of ministry called for in this commission doesn’t end with the conversion of the unbeliever. It doesn’t even end with the baptism of the new believer. Rather it continues throughout the lifetime of that Christian by means of teaching him all that Jesus commanded. That is teaching these new converts, these new believers, not only all of the words that Jesus gave us in the word of God, but ultimately teaching them the entire plan and purpose of God is revealed in all of Scripture, teaching them all that Jesus commanded. It is draining work. It is time-consuming work. It doesn’t fit in well with our missionary philosophy today of going to the nations as fast as we can, and reaching all of the unreached people groups as fast as we can, and then leaving and going on, and going on, and going on. So you know, “We need to do it all by the year 2000, or 2010, or 2020.” Making disciples for Jesus Christ is time-consuming. It is often messy and all too often is heartbreaking. Making disciples is really a never-ending process, but simply because it is a never-ending challenge is not a sound reason to stop doing it.

So in this activity of making disciples, we’ve seen both the circumstances in which disciples are made, as well as the characteristics of what a true disciple really is. Now, in second place, I’d like for us to look at the assurance that Christ has given us while we are making disciples. Look there again in Verse 20 if you will, the assurance that Christ has given us while we are in this process of making disciples. He says, *I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*” I’d like for us to see three important truths about this assurance that Jesus offers His church as it goes to the nations and as it makes disciples.

First of all, it reminds us that the assurance offered is that of divine presence. Jesus said, *I am with you...* What is the significance of Christ’s presence? Well it is anchored in the statement found earlier in the passage, there in Verse 18 where He says, *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.* Christ has been given absolute, sovereign authority over everything. Christ has the absolute authority over all of Heaven and earth. He has absolute authority over the souls of all men who have ever lived, or whoever will live. Those Satan is said to be the God of this world He ultimately does not have authority over the souls of men, but rather Christ does. And this one who has all authority over Heaven and earth has commanded His church to go to the nations of the earth, and He has promised to

His church as it goes, “I will be with you.” The ascended Christ is with His church to bless her, to empower her, to protect her, to glorify Himself through her.

The second truth that we see about this assurance that Jesus offers is that it is a continual presence. It is not only a divine presence, but it is a continual presence. Look at the word ‘*always*’, “I am with you...” what? “Always.” Always! The word translated ‘*always*’ is a word that literally means ‘*the whole of every day*’. John Broadus, in his commentary on Matthew, says about the word ‘*always*’ that these include:

Days of strength, and of weakness, days of success and of failure, days of joy and of sorrow, of youth and of age, days of life and day of death—all the days, always. There is never a moment, never a day that Jesus is not with His church, as it engages in this mission to go to the nations of the earth to make disciples.

The third truth that we see about this assurance is that it is an enduring assurance. It is an enduring presence. He says, “Even to the end of the age.” This points toward the second coming of Christ. He will never leave His church throughout the entire age, from commission to consummation, Jesus will be with us to the end, as we carry out this commission to the nations.

Well, now that we have taken a brief look at the meaning of the Great Commission, I’d like for us to back up a little bit and review again the essence of Christ’s commission. We’ve already noted that the central focus of this command is to make disciples, so any meaningful attempt to obey this commission must come to grips with what it means to make disciples. The task that Jesus has given to His church is not only to go, and not only to proclaim the Gospel, but rather it is making disciples for Jesus Christ. We cannot, of course, make disciples without going to the nations and without proclaiming the Gospel. Romans 10 says that faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ, but that is where the Great Commission starts, not where it stops. Jesus’ command to make disciples demands more than simply renting a Jeep, and driving into a village in Mexico, and preaching John 3:16 through an interpreter, and then driving away. Making disciples is much more than showing up, and showing an evangelistic film, and then moving on. Why? Because the Lord’s command to make disciples involves something significantly more than evangelism. Evangelism is an important part, but there is much more involved.

So we need to re-sharpen our focus on the essence of the Great Commission by considering two important questions. First of all, what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ? And secondly, how are disciples of Jesus Christ made?

First of all, let's look at the meaning of what is a disciple? Being a disciple means more than being a convert. It means more than being a member of a church. In Jesus' day, a disciple attached himself to his teacher. He identified with that teacher. He learned from that teacher. He followed that teacher, and often this disciple even lived with that teacher. He learned, not simply listened, but he learned, and he also began to do, and implement, and obey the teachings of his teacher. So a disciple is a learner, and a follower of Jesus Christ. One who is constantly learning of Him, and obeying Him, and following Him. That is a disciple. Let me quote John Broadus again. He says that to make disciples means:

To bring them into the relation of pupil to teacher, taking His yoke of authoritative instruction, accepting what He says is true because He says it, and submitting to His requirements as right because He makes them.

In other words, in a simplified sense, it means it involves the transformation of rebels into followers and obeyers of Jesus Christ. The Great Commission, properly obeyed, produces disciples, not just decisions. It is true that becoming Christ's disciple occurs at a decisive point in time, and it involves the repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But one of the sad evidences of a defective and unbiblical missionary strategy has been the tendency to be satisfied with the evangelistic decisions that yield no lasting fruit, or transformation of the lives of those who have supposedly made a decision for Jesus Christ. The work of missions is intended to produce disciples who follow and obey His word. They follow Christ and obey His word. I'd like you to turn over to John's Gospel, Chapter 8, if you will for just a moment because that is exactly what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught. John 8, drop down to Verse 31.

John 8:31-32 ~ So Jesus was saying to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

According to Jesus, a genuine disciple of His is one who abides in His word, but I'd like for you to really notice what is going on here in this text. Verse 31 says that Jesus was talking to a group of Jews that had believed Him. They had believed Him, it says, yet in Verse 37, Jesus says that these same people were seeking to kill Him. How could these Jews be described as both believing Jesus, and yet still as

seeking to kill Him? Well it was because their faith wasn't genuine. They weren't true disciples of Jesus Christ. Jesus says in Verse 37, here in this text:

John 8:37 ~ ...you seek to kill Me, because (Why?) My word has no place in you.

So Jesus lays down exactly what it is that separates counterfeit faith from true faith, what it is that distinguishes fickle disciples from genuine disciples, and that line of demarcation, He says, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly My disciples." Disciples are those who hear, and understand, and obey Jesus' teaching. They love the word of God, they are constantly in the word of God, and they are seeking to obey the word of God. That is a true disciple, Jesus says. D.A. Carson, commenting on this verse says:

Perseverance is the mark of true faith, of real disciples. A genuine believer remains in Jesus' word, His teaching. In other words, such a person seeks to obey it, to understand it better, and finds it more precious, and more controlling precisely when other forces flatly oppose it.

Perseverance and obedience to the word of God is the evidence of genuine faith. The word 'abide' here means to habitually abide, to remain in Jesus' words, to live in obedience to them. The command of the Great Commission is to make disciples. To make disciples not only means that we preach the Gospel of Christ, but we also continue to teach these new learners and followers of Jesus Christ the whole counsel of the word of God so that they will hold fast to, and habitually remain in Jesus' word. Folks, that reality, and really that reality alone, whether a person abides in the word of Christ or not tells us whether that true disciples are being made or not. If we mean business about fulfilling the Great Commission, then we need to stand without apology, for a divinely powerful, transforming Gospel that calls people to repentance for the forgiveness for sins, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot dodge that fact. The Gospel calls people to turn from sin to the Savior. The Gospel calls people to turn from vain idols to the one, true, and living God. The Gospel calls people from dead works to Christ's righteousness. Christ commanded us to make disciples who would follow Him in baptism, and obey all that He commanded, so our missionary efforts must settle for nothing less than this.

But we need to quickly ask ourselves, how then are disciples made? How are disciples made? What is the God-ordained strategy for making disciples? What we often fail to do, I believe, as it relates to missionary strategy, is we often fail to

study carefully the book of Acts. We fail to extract the missionary strategy found in the book of Acts. You see it is in the Gospels that Christ has given us the divine mandate for making disciples of all of the nations, but it is not until we get to the book of Acts that God actually shows us His divine strategy for making those disciples. What is God's strategy for making disciples? What is God's strategy for obeying the Great Commission to all the nations of the world? Well I believe that when we carefully study the missionary strategy of the apostles and their associates in the book of Acts, a very clear, biblical strategy for making disciples is seen. There were three essential, Holy Spirit-directed elements in the missionary strategy of the New Testament church, and I'd like for us to briefly look at them this morning. You might even want to turn over to the book of Acts. We're going to be looking at a number of texts here.

The first strategy that we need to see, as we come to the book of Acts, when it comes to the church fulfilling this Great Commission mandate, is that God chose men who had been transformed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and He sent those men to the nations. God chose Peter, and John, and Stephen, and Philip, and Paul, and Barnabas, and others. God's method for making disciples is man. He uses you and He uses me. His method is man. Jesus said to the disciples in John 20:21, "As the Father has sent Me, even so I am..." What? "I am sending you." Just prior to His ascension back into Heaven, He said to them in Acts 1:8, "You will be My witnesses. *You* will be my witnesses in all of these places."

God saved Saul and then He sent him as a chosen instrument to the Gentiles, and to kings, and to the children of Israel. God's method for making disciples among the nations is man, man who is willing to go, willing to leave home, willing to leave family, willing to leave luxuries, willing to leave familiarities and go to the nations of the earth. God's method is man, and I think it's very interesting to note that God didn't choose the learned scholars of Alexandria. He didn't choose the distinguished philosophers of Athens. He didn't choose the eloquent orators of Rome, or the self-righteous leaders of Israel. Rather, God chose simple fishermen. He chose despised traders. He chose obscure men, uneducated, common men, the book of Acts says. Even the learned men such as Luke and Paul were humble and unopposing people. But God's strategy for building His church and making disciples among the nations is man.

Secondly, the second Holy Spirit directed strategy that we see in the book of Acts is those men traveled everywhere. They traveled from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria, to the remotest part of the earth, and they taught and they preached the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. They went everywhere teaching

and preaching the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. And so time and time again as we read through the book of Acts and we see the actual strategy that was used by the apostles in the carrying out of the great commission, we see the centrality of the preaching and teaching and proclaiming of the word of God over and over again.

Let me just give you a flavor. In Acts 2, we see this truth straight away in Peter's sermon at Pentecost. From Verse 14, all the way to Verse 41, Peter preached the word of God, and when you examine His sermon, what do you see in his sermon? You see that it is filled with Old Testament quote, after Old Testament quote, after Old Testament quote, after Old Testament quote. He was teaching and proclaiming the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. And then he comes to the end of this sermon in Verse 38, exhorting the people to:

Acts 2:38 ~ "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins,..."

And then he says in Verse 40 that:

Acts 2:40 ~ And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them,...

This is followed in Acts 4 where we're told that the Jewish religious leaders were so angry, they were so annoyed with Peter and John, that they arrested them. What was it that Peter and John were doing that greatly annoyed these leaders? Well, Verse 2 of Chapter 4 says it was:

Acts 4:2 ~ ...because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

And so the next day when they were called before the Jewish high counsel to be examined, Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, says in Verses 11 and 12:

Acts 4:11 ~ This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. 12 And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

And then if you drop down to Verse 31 of Acts 4, it says the apostles:

Acts 4:31 ~ ...continued to speak the word of God with (What?) boldness.

And Verse 33 adds:

Acts 4:33 ~ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,...

In Acts 5, after the apostles had been arrested, beaten, and then charged not to speak in the Name of Jesus, Verse 42 tells us in response to this threat:

Acts 5:42 ~ ...they did not (What?) cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.

Turn over to Acts 6 and look at Verse 10. Acts 6:10 tells us that the people:

Acts 6:10 ~ could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he (Stephen) was speaking.

He was speaking. Look at Acts 8:25. It says when the apostles were returning to Jerusalem from Samaria, they were:

Acts 8:25 ~ ...preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Do you see that? They were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans, and in Acts 13 when the church at Antioch sent Barnabas and Saul on the first missionary journey, Verses 4 and 5 of Acts Chapter 13 tell us:

Acts 13:4 ~ So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit,...

Acts 13:5 ~ ...they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.

And then from Verses 16 through 41, Paul preaches another sermon after which the next day, Verse 44 tells us almost the whole city gathered to hear what? They gathered to what? They gathered to hear the word of God preached and proclaimed. And then in Verse 48, when the Gentiles heard the word of the Lord preached:

Acts 13:48 ~ ...and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. 49 And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

Acts 19:10 tells us that Paul stayed in Ephesus for two whole years. Verse 10 says:

Acts 19:10 ~ ...so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord,...

Verse 20 adds:

Acts 19:20 ~ So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.

And then when you look at the last two verses of the book of Acts in Acts 28:30-31, these last two verses tell us that the apostle Paul, while he was in Rome, welcomed all who came to him, and what did he do? He proclaimed the kingdom of God, and he taught them about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

Acts 28:30 ~ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, 31 proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

You see, the early church had the right divine strategy. They had the right message. They had the right method for delivering that divine message. That method was teaching and preaching and proclaiming the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. The apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that it pleased God...

1 Corinthians 1:21 ~ through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

And the apostle Peter writes in 1 Peter 1:23 that you have been born again through the living and abiding word of God, and this word is the good news that was what? It was preached to you.

And then in 1 Peter 2:2, Peter adds that newborn Christians are to long for the milk of the word of God so that by it they may grow up into their salvation. So from salvation to sanctification, the strategy for making disciples that we see in the New Testament is to teach and preach the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God, centered in the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

One commentator writes, and I quote:

The book of Acts reveals that the apostles in the early church fulfilled Jesus' instructions to make disciples with an astonishing single-mindedness of purpose, preaching the word of God for the salvation of sinners and the edification of saints.

But it is precisely this teaching, this proclaiming, this preaching of the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God that is too often today being omitted from much so-called missionary work. There's been a mega shift in the church today away from making disciples through evangelizing, baptizing, and teaching Jesus' disciples the whole counsel of the word of God, and there's been a mega shift towards social actions and toward mercy ministries. We're being told by very influential voices within the Christian community that the church really has a two-fold mission in the world—to preach the Gospel, they tell us, and to do social justice and mercy ministries which involve social and cultural transformation and renewal projects.

In fact, one key leader in this movement says that promoting social justice and meeting humanitarian needs is not just an equal partner with the Gospel, but he says it *is* the Gospel. Folks, do you know what that's called? It's called the social gospel, which is not the biblical Gospel. Contemporary missionary agency representatives who visit the campuses of Christian colleges and seminaries in the United States to recruit new missionaries report that the needle of student interest is clearly swinging away from Gospel proclamation and making disciples through the teaching of the Bible and proclaiming of the Gospel, and it is swinging towards social action like medical relief, digging wells, and combating poverty.

In fact, in one recent missionary survey, 25% of the missionaries in one country responded by saying that they seldom or never shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and 31% of them said that they are not currently discipling anyone. These are career, vocational, evangelical, Protestant missionaries.

In 2007, just prior to returning to Latin America for our second tour of duty, Carolyn and I attended a Spanish refresher course in San Jose, Costa Rica, where evangelical missionaries from many different evangelical denominations and missions around the world go to study to learn Spanish. Well, they go at least to study Spanish. The goal and the hope is to learn Spanish. During the time period that we were at the school, there were approximately 90 different missionary units, a unit being either a missionary couple or a single missionary. While we were there, we learned that of those 90 units, only 3 of them were going to a field of

service in Latin America with the specific purpose to evangelize and make disciples through Gospel proclamation and teaching the word of God. The others were going to work primarily in medicine, secular education, combat poverty, etc... Even worse, some missionaries today believe that without some kind of social action or mercy ministry preceding Gospel proclamation, there will be no believing response to the Gospel. One such advocate says, and I quote, "Simply preaching the Gospel will fail unless social action or mercy ministry precedes it." Did you hear that? In other words, according to this new kind of peace corps mentality, the Gospel is not powerful enough, the word of God is not sufficient enough, for making disciples apart from housing reforms, job development, education, and healthcare.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a direct assault on the power of the Gospel of Christ. It is a direct assault on the divine sufficiency of the word of God. It is a direct assault on the Great Commission. It's the church's new pragmatism. *The Gospel needs a lead-in, because the Gospel will never succeed all by itself.* You know, historically, this has been seen over and over again. All you have to do is to do a study of the American mainline Protestant churches during the 20th Century. That's all you have to do. Just study and see what happened during the 20th Century among the Protestant evangelical denominations here in America, and when social justice and relief projects are used as lead-ins to the Gospel, A) The Gospel is moved into second place, and B) The lead-in medium becomes the message. And when the church puts the Gospel and the word of God in second place, they have a way of staying in second place, and eventually they just disappear all together.

Evangelist D. L. Moody used to warn Christians about going into the world with a loaf of bread in one hand and with a Bible in the other hand, because he said sinners will take the loaf of bread and they will completely ignore the Bible. That's exactly the point that Jesus made in John 6, and again in John 8, that the crowds who followed Him were motivated by a superficial desire for what? For food rather than any real, true understanding of the true spiritual significance of His person and of His mission.

D. A. Carson, in his article entitled *A Hole in the Gospel*, after noting that studies have shown that American Christians (listen to this) American Christians are spending about five times more money on poverty relief projects than on evangelism and church planting. After giving this warning, he warns that the Gospel is too often the missing component in what is today called Holistic Gospel ministry. He writes, and I quote:

Deeds of mercy are not the Gospel. Judging by the distribution of the American missionary dollar, the biggest hole in our Gospel is the Gospel itself.

One of the defining problems, I believe, of the evangelical church in our generation is a spiraling loss of confidence in the divine power, authority, and sufficiency of the word of God. Evangelicals openly doubt the attracting and saving power of the Gospel, and so various forms of pragmatism are the result of all this. Social justice and mercy ministry are the new pragmatism. They are the new lead-in to the Gospel, because the Gospel is not sufficient by itself. That's not what we see in the book of Acts. What we saw in the book of Acts, what we see in the book of Acts, is the apostles did not employ a strategy of preaching the word of God plus social action. They did not employ a strategy of preaching the word of God plus humanitarian effort. That's not even what we see in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Turn over to Luke 4 for just a moment, a passage that is often used by advocates of these social relief, mercy ministry kinds of programs. They tell us that when we look at the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, this is exactly what He did, and this is perhaps the most quoted text among them, Luke 4:18-19, where Luke is citing from Isaiah 61:1-2. The Lord Jesus is here of course at Nazareth, His hometown where He was raised. He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day and He stood up to read, and He opened the scroll to Isaiah, and here is what it said in Verse 18:

Luke 4:18 ~ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And so these social mercy ministry advocates point to this text and say look, Jesus ministered to the poor. He ministered to the captives, to the blind, to the oppressed. What do they forget to tell us? That Jesus is here referring to the spiritually poor, to the spiritual captives, to the spiritually blind, to the spiritually oppressed. In fact, if you drop down to Verse 42 of Luke 4 and follow through on this, it says in Verse 42:

Luke 4:42 ~ And when it was day, he (Jesus) departed and went into a desolate place. And the people sought him and came to him, and would have kept him from leaving them,

In other words, they didn't want Him to go away. Verse 43:

Luke 4:43 ~ but he said to them,...

I love that word *but* there. Do you know what it indicates? It indicates that Jesus' purposes were different from their purposes. Their purposes were that Jesus would stay and continue to heal them and provide food for them, but it says obviously those weren't Jesus' purpose or the ultimate purpose He has in mind. Verse 43:

Luke 4:43 ~ but he said to them, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose."

So whether it's the apostles' ministry in the book of Acts, whether it's Jesus' ministry, what we see is a priority of the proclamation of the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, in their excellent book *What is the Mission of the Church?* write that it is estimated that one trillion dollars of Western aid has poured into Africa in the last five decades, yet, they write, problems of poverty, AIDS, orphans, and war has clearly not been solved. One veteran missionary to Africa writes, "More money is not the solution to Africa's problems, rather Jesus Christ and Him crucified clearly proclaimed is."

Someone came to Martin Luther and asked him, "Martin, how can you explain the Reformation?" Kingdoms were tottering, the papacy was being weakened, the entire European continent was undergoing change, and they come to Martin, and say, "Martin, how do you explain this?" to which Luther responded, "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's word, otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, the word of God so greatly weakened the papacy, that never a prince and never an emperor inflicted so much damage. I did nothing. The word of God did it all," he said.

Folks, this is God's strategy for fulfilling the Great Commission. For making disciples for Jesus Christ, converted and transformed men who go to all the nations preaching, and teaching, and proclaiming the word of God in the power of the Spirit of God. But notice yet a third key strategy for making disciples throughout the book of Acts.

In those areas where the word of God was believed and received, guess what happened? Local churches sprang up all over the place. From the first church in Jerusalem, to Antioch, to Cyprus, to Galatia, to Asia, to Europe, local assemblies, local congregations were established over which Godly pastors were appointed in order to shepherd, and govern, and teach, and disciple.

Here we see yet another element of God's strategy for fulfilling the Great Commission, and that is establishing biblical, local churches. Now, let me ask you another question. What are the implications of that then? What are the implications of this? Let me suggest three.

First of all, I believe the New Testament missions must aim to establish new churches. When we are to go to the nations of the earth, our goal should be to make disciples through establishing biblical, local churches. Local churches come into being as God saves sinners. Go back to Acts 14 and let me just show you one example. In Acts 14:22-23, here Paul is going back through some places where he had earlier visited to preach the Gospel, and now he is going back visiting them again. In Verse 22, it says:

Acts 14:22 ~ strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Most of the New Testament epistles were written to churches, to Rome, to Corinth, to Galatia, Philippi, and Colossae. The apostle John writes the book of Revelation to the seven churches of Asia. The task of fulfilling the Great Commission and making disciples for Christ is not complete—listen carefully, please—The task is not complete until converts are rooted in a local church that can nourish and instigate continual spiritual growth in the word of God, and this implies that there are Godly shepherds who are competent in the Scriptures, that constantly teach, and preach, and govern, and discipline, resulting in the building up of the body of Christ to mature manhood to the stature of the fullness of Christ, Paul says in Ephesians 4. Making disciples implies faithful membership and participation in a biblical, local church where every member of the body is faithfully serving the Lord and growing in the word. They are living in submission to Christ and in fellowship with other believers, and in many mission fields of the world today, there is a great lack of both biblical, local churches, and there is a great lack of missionaries seeking to make disciples through the establishment of biblical, local churches.

The second implication is that the New Testament missions must aim to plant not only new churches, but they must aim to plant new indigenous churches. The second issue is whether a church that is planted with the view that it is to assume responsibility for itself.

In other words, a truly indigenous church is a church that is self-governing. It has its own biblically qualified national leadership, and it's not permanently dependent on external leadership. It's self-governing, but it is also a church that is self-propagating. The national Christians know how to evangelize and make disciples, and they're not dependent on outsiders to come in and do it for them. We often get asked, "Well, we'd like to send a missionary team down to you. What is there for us to do?" Well, really not much, because the national church is doing it. That's God's method—a church that is self-governing, a church that is self-propagating.

Finally, an indigenous church is self-supporting, that is, the financial support that is needed to maintain the ministry is generated from the national Christians themselves, and where patterns of regular financial support from outsiders are no longer involved. I think I shared with you in the past about the Neza Church. When we first went there seven years ago, it was just a small Bible study led by Pastor Gabriel Martinez, and Gabriel wanted me to serve as a missionary elder alongside of him to turn this Bible study into a full-fledged biblical, local congregation, and I often teased Gabriel. I said to Gabriel, our first elder divorce, our first divorce at our first elder meeting was over the issue of finances.

The women would bake food and bring food to the church to sell on Sunday. They would buy clothes and bring them. They would have all kinds of sales, and bazaars, and what not. I said, "Brother Gabriel, let me show you what the word of God teaches about this." I think at the time there were about 3,000 pesos a month, about \$300 a month that the saints were giving. He was convinced by the Scriptures, but then he looked at me and said, "Well, I think next Sunday after the service, *you* should get up and tell the people," which I did, and beginning that Sunday, they ceased and desisted from all forms of that kind of fundraising, and they begin to give by grace. One lady after the explanation said, "You mean that that means I don't have to go to the grocery store, and come home and cook all this stuff, and bring it to the church, and then sell it? I can just take that money and give it?" Yeah, it's pretty simple.

Folks, we're talking about an area of Mexico City that has 40% unemployment and most of those 60% that have employment earn about \$40 a week. Today, six or seven years later, that church is giving almost 50,000 pesos a month, the equivalent of about \$5,000 a month. They are supporting their own pastor full time. They have sent out missionaries from their own church that they support. They have a Bible institute, and they're now working with three other congregations to help them become local churches.

We must establish indigenous churches. Too often missionaries have labored their entire lives to establish one local congregation, but because they did not seek to establish an indigenous congregation, it was only a short matter of time before a lifetime of work disappeared. That's why missionaries from the very beginning must aim to train national pastors and national leaders and teach them how to do the work of making disciples and establishing biblical congregations. That's why Paul instructed Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, "And what you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to faithful men." It's really not difficult. At least it's not difficult to understand.

So New Testament missions must aim to plant new churches, indigenous churches, and thirdly, reproducing churches. Paul said of the Thessalonian church in 1 Thessalonians 1:8...

1 Thessalonians 1:8 ~ For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything.

Isn't that wonderful? I love that. Paul, you came here, you taught us the word of God, you taught us the Gospel, a church was planted, and now you just stay where you are, because we are out proclaiming the Gospel to everybody. This concept is inherent of the Great Commission. A church has not come to full maturity until it becomes obedient to the Great Commission itself. I believe that it is legitimate to speak of the true missionary target, not just as church planting but also as the establishment of a self-perpetuating church-planting movement. That's what's happened. I mean, it's taken us about five years as the staff at the Word of Grace Seminary to wake up to this, but that's what's happened in Mexico City where literally dozens and dozens of congregations in Mexico City alone, perhaps over 100, are now being led and pastored by Mexican graduates of The Word of Grace Seminary, and every day we learn many of these are establishing yet more congregations, and those congregations are establishing yet more congregations. That is the intent of the Great Commission.

Jesus said to His disciples, "As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you. Go to the nations and make disciples." The mission of the church is to go into all the world to make disciples by proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit of God, and gathering these disciples into biblical, local churches that they might worship the only true and living God, and to obey His commands to the glory of God the Father.

Let's pray...

Father, we thank You for the clear instruction that You have given us in Your word not only to know and understand the meaning of the Great Commission, but to know, Father, Your divine strategy for fulfilling it. Father, I pray that by Your word this morning, You would correct our understanding, You would strengthen our understanding, You would strengthen our commitment to make disciples both here and around the world to all the nations for Your glory. Lord, I thank You for Providence Church. Thank You for these precious saints. I pray that You will continue to use them and bless them as they seek to glorify You through announcing the Good News of the mercy of Christ to the nations of the world. And Father, I pray that You will continue to save and regenerate rebellious, lost sinners so that You may be glorified for Your mercy. We pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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