

The Last Word: The Great Commission: Ecclesiology

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I did a *Google* web search the other day on 'The Great Commission' and got 61,300,000 hits in 0.23 seconds. I had been working on an exegesis of Matthew 28:16–20 and in all the commentaries I had used for part of my work, none addressed the question that had come to me during this time. Who coined the term 'The Great Commission'? I even emailed one of my favourite New Testament scholars and friend, Craig Keener, and he didn't know. If Keener doesn't know, it's time to risk the Web.

It turns out that this passage may have got its summary label from a Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz (1621–88), but it was Hudson Taylor, nearly 200 years later, who popularized the use of 'The Great Commission'. So, it seems like Welz or some other Post-Reformation missionary probably coined the term 'The Great Commission' and since that time, the passage has been the theme for countless mission talks and conferences. (It may be of some comfort to Web-sceptics to know that I ended up finding this bit of history in a hard-bound book on the history of world missions belonging to a colleague here at John Brown University.)

What I realized both from my exegetical work, and somewhat confirmed by this historical find, was that for the first 1600 years of the greatest exponential mission-driven expansion of the life of church, this passage was read and understood as the trinitarian foundation of ecclesiology, not as fanfare for missiology. The disciples, as the apostolic authority of the soon-to-be-Spirit-empowered-Church, are called together in order to be drawn into, to be called into, the on-going mission of the triune God.

Jesus commissioned these eleven on that mountain in Galilee to 'make disciples' through initiation into the embodied life of God in the church by baptism in the triune Name and through teaching what they had learned from Jesus about faithful obedience. This is not a passage about sending the disciples out to buck the system, take on the world, and save the

universe. The 'Great Commission' doesn't begin here, or at Pentecost, or with Paul, or when a Christian today decides on a mission agency to give to or go with. The 'Great Commission' began long, long ago in the hidden depths of God's own being.

The triune God is eternally a commissional God. The mission of the Father was the sending of the Son. The mission of the Son in the incarnation was to reveal the life of the Father. The Spirit's mission is to bear witness to the Son through the Church. Contrary to the opening mantra of Star Trek, there are no 'strange new universes where no one has gone before'. God has been there. God has been at work from before the beginning. God goes before us into our future, and into the tomorrows of the world. These eleven disciples and all who have believed their witness (John 17:20), the Church, the Body of Christ, are commissioned to indwell, declare and demonstrate God's love for the world.

This is really a text about the commissioning of the Church to share God's life and, in the power and reality of that union with Christ by the Spirit, to share in joy of God's on-going mission to the world. The early church, the patristic Fathers, and for over 1600 years the Church recognized that this final passage of Matthew focused first on who Jesus is. Because God is good, because Jesus is risen from the grave, because the Spirit is poured out, God's people are called to let the world know the good news of a victorious Saviour and the very presence of God in the world by the Spirit. Jesus is saying, as you 'go along your way' (a good translation of the usual 'Go ye'), with the power of my very Spirit, be heralds of this Good News. Alert people to recognize and submit to my Lordship through inauguration into my Body, and nurture their fitness for my unrivalled reign in their lives!

The crescendo begins in this passage when Jesus declares, 'All authority' belongs to him absolutely. In this, Jesus is unburdening these disciples, whose faith was ambivalent until Pentecost ('they worshipped him; but some doubted'). It's understandable that the redefinition of Jewish monotheism would take a bit of time!). Jesus inaugurates this commissioning with the assurance that the burden, the mission, is his, not theirs. The Risen One has already accomplished the mission, borne the burden and triumphed victoriously for the salvation of the world. In union with Jesus and in union with each other, these disciples and all those who have believed to this day are to announce this Good News of this Kingdom to all the people groups of the world.

Theology is the bedrock of mission. The New Testament writers and the early church recognized something that Kevin Vanhoozer summarizes well when he writes:

if the God who reveals himself in history were to correspond to who God is in eternity, the 'missions' of God to the world must correspond to eternal 'processions' with God's being.

In other words, God's mission is an extension of God's character and triune nature, God's essence, God's very self. From the fact that the Son is sent into the world and historically begotten, then, the early church derived the truth as expressed in the historic creeds that the Son's being, in relation to the Father, is 'eternally begotten'.

God's mission to the world involves God's eternal being as Father, Son and Spirit, and it is this eternal relationship that is the real focus of Jesus' 'Great Commission'. So, Jesus first words make sense, don't they? On that final day with his best students, on that day of his ascension, on that day (probably just about ten days before the birth of the church at Pentecost) Jesus says, 'All authority in heaven and on earth' is given to him. Make no mistake about it, Jesus is making very, very clear that he is, 'Begotten, not made, one in being with the Father', and with the Father, will send the 'Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life' to empower the Church to join the triune mission.

The focus of Matthew 28:16-20 is ecclesiology; it's about the Church's inauguration, identity and union with Christ in order to be an extension of his own life in the world. Ecclesiology is the fountainhead of missiology. Like Jesus, we are commissioned to 'do' who we 'are' and that's what makes it GREAT.