

The Great Commission

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The challenging command of Christ which closes each of the synoptic gospels is often called “the great commission.” It reads, “Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Mt. 28:19-20). Many reasons exist for this commission to be modified with the adjective “great.” Perhaps a study of some of them will be edifying, and when appreciation for the commission of Jesus is deepened a higher level of involvement may result.

God is described as “the great God” in Titus 2:13, and he has planned man’s salvation from eternity past through Christ and his church. The apostle to the Gentiles wrote, “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:10-11). God’s plan of redeeming man through Christ expresses “his great love wherewith he loved us” (Eph. 2:4). The Psalmist said, “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; and his greatness is unsearchable” (Psa. 145:3). So, the great commission is great because it was the great God who planned it.

The angel Gabriel prior to Christ’s birth said to his mother, Mary, “He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end” (Lk. 1:32-33). The fact of Jesus being the Son of God was attested to by the miracles he did. The gospel of Luke records the reaction of the many people who watched as Jesus raised the widow of Nain’s son to life again. Luke wrote, “And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and That God hath visited his people” (Lk. 7:16). The people correctly viewed Jesus as a great prophet.

The writer of the book of Hebrews saw Christ as a great high priest and a great shepherd of the sheep also. In chapter four he wrote, “Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession” (v. 14). At the close of the book the reader is admonished, “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (vv. 20-21). Christ has indeed become great, and three particular areas in which he is said to be great are as prophet, high priest, and shepherd.

Another reason for the commission being ascribed as great is because of its contrast with the limited commission during the earthly ministry of Christ to the Jews only. When Jesus sent out the twelve he said, “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 10:5-6). Whereas this charge to the twelve (Mt. 10:5) and to the seventy (Lk. 10:1) was limited in its scope, the great

commission was “into all the world,” “to the whole creation” or “to every creature,” and to all the nations.

The great commission is analogous to the great supper prepared by a “certain man” whom Jesus told about in Luke 14:15-24. The invitation issued was, “Come; for all things are now ready.” The great commission is God’s invitation for “all the world” to seize upon the opportunity for salvation in Christ. Excuses made for not accepting the “certain man’s” invitation to the great supper resulted in a forfeiture of the invitation. Others of less fortunate circumstances were then invited to the great supper, and they came. When room for more guests was still available, the servants were urged to compel those out on the highways to come in. Their objective was to fill the spacious house. This story teaches at least two lessons. One, men and women are quick to make excuses, even about something as consequential as their eternal destiny. Two, God’s gracious invitation of salvation occupies the focus of his attention regardless of the reaction men have to it.

The great commission was accompanied by convincing attestation. At the end of Mark’s gospel the great commission appears followed by two statements from Mark. He wrote, “So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen” (Mk. 16:19-20). To confirm the word preached, inspired men with great power did wonders and miracles. Luke records, “And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. . . .And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people” (Acts 4:33a; 6:8). The convincing nature of these “great wonders and miracles” comes boldly to the forefront as even the antagonistic religious authorities composed of Annas the high priest and Caiaphas, the other priests, rulers, elders, and scribes find that they can “say nothing against it” and “cannot deny it” (Acts 4:14, 16). Hebrews 2:3-4 proves that the various signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit served to confirm the word of Christ.

Finally, the commission is great because of the great things that accompany it. Luke recorded that “great grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33b). A great sense of wonder, awe, and fear possessed the Christians (Acts 5:5, 11). Luke presents the great commission being associated with “great joy” from the first of his gospel account (Lk. 2:10) to the last of it (Lk. 24:52) and right on through to the task of carrying out the great commission as the church spreads (Acts 8:8; 15:3). Not only is “great joy” a feature of the commission of Christ but “great consolation” or comfort and encouragement is, too (Philem. 7). “Exceeding great and precious promises” come out of the commission (2 Pet. 1:4). The great commission should be of paramount interest to everyone because of the “great gain” and “great reward” it promises (Mt. 5:12; Lk. 6:23, 35; 1 Tim. 6:6; and Heb. 10:35). In summary, the great commission speaks of “so great a salvation” (Heb. 2:3, ASV).

When Christ returns from heaven to judge the world (Mt. 25:31-33), he will come “in the clouds with great power and glory” (Mk. 13:26). Perhaps it will not be until then that the true greatness of the charge Jesus gave to that small band of disciples from the top of the Mount of Olives just prior to his ascension will be fully realized. Jesus said, “Then shall the righteous

shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Mt. 13:43).