



The key activities of the Great Commission

The basic activities

Biblically speaking, we may say that the different texts of the Great Commission define the basic range of activities that we need to focus on in our missionary work. In fact, the missionary is sent out so that his or her sending churches, through the representation of this missionary, may fulfill their responsibility *to this Great Commission*. Therefore, the Great Commission ought to serve as the source from which all our missionary activities flow.

Accounts of this commission are found in each of the four gospels and in the book of Acts. Each account presents the same commission, but focusing on different elements.

Matthew 28:18–20

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, bap-

tizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Of the five texts of the Great Commission, Matthew has the *most detailed* description of the activities involved in accomplishing it. Grammatically speaking, these verses contain one central command and three gerunds or participles that highlight the activities associated with fulfilling this central command.

In these verses, the central command is “make disciples of all the nations.” *This activity, therefore, is the principal focus here.* *The Church needs to make disciples.* It is not enough to simply evangelize. It is not enough to simply improve lifestyle and health conditions. These are important and commendable activities, but Matthew emphasizes that we must make disciples. Therefore, we need to do these other activities (evangelism, community development, etc.) *and much more*. And all of our activities need to be focused

toward the principal goal of *making disciples*. In other words, the Church needs to make new believers and then bring them to complete Christian maturity. Every believer should become a *complete* disciple in Jesus Christ. Perhaps this is why the message of these verses focuses so much on including every area of Christian life and Christian maturity. *And the Church needs to make these disciples of all the nations*. It is not enough to just make disciples among the Church's own ethnic and socio-cultural context.

The three gerunds or participles that highlight the activities associated with fulfilling this central command are: *having gone* (a past tense participle in the Greek), *baptizing*, and *teaching*. It is as if these verses had said "make disciples of all the nations by going, baptizing, and teaching." These are the sub-activities that lead to the goal of making disciples of all nations.

The first participle, *having gone*, is translated in these verses with the force of the command "go." And it picks up the force of a command due to the fact that it describes the *background necessary* to achieve the principal command. Making disciples of all the nations presupposes the activity of going. Without going to where the unsaved are, it is impossible to make disciples of them. Thus, this first gerund focuses on the *geographical* activity necessary to make disciples of all the nations.

The second gerund is "*baptizing* them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." This gerund highlights the death of the old man and the resurrection of a new creature in Jesus Christ that

occurs when a person believes in Christ. It also highlights the public identification of this new believer with the triune God and with His Church. Therefore, this gerund refers to both *the evangelization of the unsaved* and *the incorporation of new believers into the Church* (represented by the local church). Thus, these verses cover the *base* for discipleship (salvation and regeneration) and the *environment* in which this discipleship takes place (the local church).

The last gerund is "*teaching* them to observe all that I commanded you." With this gerund these verses focus on the instruction of these new believers and the content of this instruction (everything that Christ has commanded us). Note that with regard to content, every aspect of the Christian life is included. Thus, this gerund refers to *teaching* and *instruction*.

These three activities (going, baptizing, and teaching) are *all* necessary if we are to make disciples of all the nations (the central command). And please note that they are given in their proper chronological order: first, we have to go to where the lost are; second, we have to evangelize them and incorporate the new believers into a local church; and third, we have to teach them concerning Christian maturity. We cannot evangelize or incorporate a person who has not been geographically reached, and we cannot truly instruct a person in the ways of the Lord if they do not first have a personal relationship with Him.

Mark 16:15

And He said to them, "Go into all the

world and preach the gospel to all creation.”

In his gospel, Mark has the tendency to record things in a very concise and brief form, and his account of the Great Commission is no exception. Just as in the Matthew text, there is only one central command here: “preach.” The word “go,” once again, is a past tense participle (“having gone”) that basically acquires the force of a command, but is not the grammatical focus of the verse. The central activity here is preaching the gospel to all creation. *The Church needs to proclaim, announce, spread abroad the message of the gospel to all people all around the world.*

Luke 24:46–49

And He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

In this text, Luke basically focuses on two activities: preaching (“proclaiming”) and being a witness. *The Church must announce, proclaim the message of*

repentance for forgiveness of sins. And it must be a witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and to repentance and forgiveness. We must be witnesses to what Christ has done in us and for us.

John 20:21

Jesus therefore said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”

The text of John is another concise and abbreviated presentation of the Great Commission. As such, it focuses on being a sent one, being a representative. Therefore, *the central activity here is that of being sent by Jesus Christ, being His ambassador.*

Acts 1:8

“But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

These verses record one basic activity, that of being a witness to all the world. *To achieve the Great Commission, we must be witnesses of Jesus Christ to what He has done in and for us, and our testimony must reach to the remotest part of the earth.* We must work in Jerusalem (the context where we are), Judea (contexts that are close to our own), Samaria (contexts that are similar but different as well), and the remotest

part of the earth (contexts that are radically different from our own).

Conclusions

Based upon what we have seen, what may we conclude? According to the Great Commission, we need to do the following.

◆ *Make disciples of all the nations.* This phrase of Matthew’s summarizes, in a very concise way, the principal general goal of missionary work.

◆ *Go to where the unsaved are.* We should not wait for these people to come to us. It is our responsibility to go to them.

◆ *Evangelize.* We need to persuade the unsaved to see their spiritual need, and show them how Jesus is the only true answer for this need.

◆ *Be witnesses to what Christ has done.* We need to communicate what Christ has done for and in our lives, showing how He has met our spiritual needs.

◆ *Proclaim repentance for forgiveness of sins.* We need to announce that in Jesus Christ, and through repentance, there is forgiveness for our sins.

◆ *Incorporate new believers into a good, evangelical local church.* This will be the environment and family within which a very significant part of teaching and discipleship will take place.

◆ *Preach and announce all that Christ has commanded us.* We need to preach and announce the Bible in its entirety.

◆ *Teach them to observe all that Christ has com-*

manded us. This simple sentence summarizes the entire area of discipleship.

◆ *Serve as ambassadors sent with authority and with a specific purpose.* Jesus has sent us, and we represent Him. And when local churches are also involved in this process, they also are represented by their ambassadors, their missionaries.

◆ *Work within four categories or types of contexts.* We need to do all of this (one way or another, and to one degree or another) within four categories or types of contexts. We need to do this in our *Jerusalem* (the context where we currently are located). We need to do this in our *Judea* (contexts that are close to our context). We need to do this in our *Samaria* (contexts that are similar to our context, but different as well). And we need to do this in *the remotest part of the earth* (contexts that are radically different from our own).

◆ *Plant new churches.* When the activities and contexts contemplated here call for the planting of new churches for these new believers, then these churches must be planted. This is especially common in pioneer works, where there are no other evangelical churches around, or in a “Samaria” context or “the remotest part of the earth” context, where the differences are so great that an existing church cannot really meet the needs of these new believers.

Summary

The Great Commission places an emphasis on evangelism, discipleship, and the local church. *Evangelism*

produces the new believers that make the base for all that follows. *Discipleship* is everything that is built

upon this base. And the *local church* is the family and home where much of this discipleship should occur.

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