

# The Pastor's Mission: What Makes the Great Commission *Great*

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## Introduction

Please open up your Bibles to Matthew 28 to a section that is often described, through a term that was popularized by Hudson Taylor, as “the Great Commission.”

So you may have heard C.J. say earlier that the title I was assigned was “The Pastor’s Mission.” And I am going to add to that a subtitle, “What Makes the Great Commission *Great*.” And I would like to read with you Matthew chapter 28:16-20.

<sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Let’s pray together.

*Lord, I pray this morning that you would take this section of Scripture, that you would take this Great Commission, and you would make it even greater in our hearts. Lord, that you would help us to study your Word, you would help me to exposit your Word, that you would help us in doing so to also evaluate our model that we might enhance our model, that we might glorify you even more in our desire to preach the gospel to all nations. Lord, I pray that you would use this time to help us towards that end. And I pray in the precious name of our Savior Jesus. Amen.*

Let’s start with a question. It is actually the question that forms the subtitle: What makes the Great Commission *great*?

I was converted in college somewhere around 1979. I know many people know the day and the hour of their conversion. I think that is so cool, but that wasn’t quite the way it happened

with me. God's grace was ultimately irresistible, but I resisted to the point of exhaustion. I think fatigue played a prominent role in why I was converted.

But long before I knew what fellowship was, long before I knew about the sacraments, long before I knew about the importance of preaching, I discovered that there was this mysterious thing that we were supposed to obey as Christians called "the Great Commission." And it was always pronounced in a slow reverential manner with an accent on the word "great." It was the *Great* Commission. And older Christians would talk about it with a sense of wonder as if they were caught in a spell of longing and adventure.

And I didn't know what it was as a new Christian, but I saw the effects of it on the lives of people around me. I saw how it would snatch graduates fresh out of college and send them to far away places. They would disappear for a period of time and I didn't know where they were. "The Great Commission" had gotten them.

And it only seemed to take the most zealous kids. And if you were lukewarm or if you were a carnal Christian, let's just say you were *not* at risk, "The Great Commission" was going to leave you alone. But if you were looking to do damage to the kingdom of darkness, well, then watch out, because John the fiery zealous guy who was on the campus, involved in the campus group, taking classes, dating Cindy and then all of the sudden—bam!—he is gone. What happened? "The Great Commission" snatched him and sent him away to a faraway place.

And I have to admit that I wanted to be snatched up by "The Great Commission" and launched on some great wondrous adventure for the gospel. And do you know what? I would hear stories from people in history, amazing saints that gave up their comfort and their safety and their security and their stability to go to other lands to preach the gospel. And it was inspiring.

And I thought, "maybe that is what made it *great*." Maybe it is ability to inspire great sacrifices for a great cause. I wasn't sure, but I knew it must be something special because somehow it could capture and catapult what seemed to me to be the best and the brightest of Christians. I remember thinking, "maybe that is why they call it *great* because it seems to stir *great* burdens in *great* people to do *great* things in *great* places." I didn't know. But all I knew is I wanted some of it. I wanted in on the action. I didn't want "The Great Commission" to pass me.

Keith Green memorial concert. I think it was somewhere around 1982 or 1983. They gave a call to the fields at the end and "The Great Commission" grabbed me in that moment, jacked me up against the wall, and I answered the call. I answered the call by standing up. I answered the call by standing tall, standing to be counted, standing to go to the ends of the earth, which came as a great shock to my wife who was seated next to me looking up at me with that what-in-the-world-are-you-doing look on her face. And the fact is, I didn't know. And in that moment it didn't seem to matter because I wanted this thing that grabs the most

zealous and transports them to the end of the world. I didn't want the gospel train to leave without me. I wanted the adventure. I didn't want it to pass me by. I wanted to be part of the greatness of this commission.

So here I am 26 years later. My life didn't turn out quite the way I expected. Sure, I have had an opportunity travel a bit, but I have never made my home in the third world, or two-thirds world I should say. I have never lived the kind of nomadic adventures that fill missionary biographies. And, you know, that question has at times dogged me. Did I miss it? Did I cop out? Did I downgrade the Great Commission to a *good* idea, but not for me?

Remember the question I asked earlier? *What makes the Great Commission truly great?* Is it the sacrifices that it calls for? Is it the places that we are called to go or the people that it claims? What if I told you that the Great Commission was available to most Christians without ever leaving their area? Actually, we are going to come back to that thought. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

## **5 Reasons the Great Commission is *Great***

Let's return to Matthew chapter 28. I want to offer you five different points on what makes the Great Commission *great*.

### **1. Our commission is *great* because it starts with the finished work of Jesus Christ.**

Look again at verse 18. "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me'" (v. 18). Think about that. Because of the cross, because of the resurrection, all authority in heaven and on earth has been transferred to Christ from the Father. Now I want us to just stop and ponder what is being said there. Let's not move on too quickly.

"All authority" means all authority over Satan, all authority over all the governments of the world, all authority over the economy, all authority over the media, all authority over those that are hostile to the purposes of God and Christianity, all authority even over our choices for and against God. And although some doubt that are standing there receiving it, all authority over them as well.

See, our commission is *great*. Actually we have been rightfully taught to consider the power of the cross through the cost to God. One of the Puritans said, "Sin is so bad that it took the blood of God to take it away." Our commission is great because it invites us to ponder what the cross secured for Christ. All authority on heaven and earth has been given to him.

So God, right out of the gate, invites us to look at the fields of our community, to look at the fields of the United States, the United Kingdom, of Europe, and Africa, and Asia with a new sense of confidence because the contract has been signed, the rights have been reserved, be-

cause the authority to put the gospel into circulation has been secured by the death of Jesus Christ. And that authority is what forms the foundations for all evangelism and all missions.

In fact, that first “all” in the passage is what triggers the remaining “alls.” It is the fact that Jesus secured all authority in heaven and on earth that we now go to all nations teaching them to observe all that he has commanded us and he is with us always even to the end of the age. It locks down all that is necessary for God’s people to serve God’s warrant to the world, to look at the world, to go to the world and to tell the world, “You are wanted by God.”

But here is where it gets even more amazing. The authority that has been given to him guarantees certain results. Christ has the right to completely accomplish his will. The job gets done because he has all authority. This seems too good to be true because we are not accustomed to the idea that results can be guaranteed. We think of a slick salesman or people that are selling trendy diets or thin promises. Things like that immediately come to mind, but it is not like that at all.

Our commission is great because it guarantees results from us proclaiming the gospel.

Let me give you an example. There is a section in Acts 18 where Paul is being battered by attacks in Corinth. In a rare moment of Paul’s honesty and acknowledgement of his own fearfulness Christ speaks to him and says, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (Acts 18:9-10).

Here is the kicker. These people that Christ is referring to are not Christians yet. He is referring to those who are yet to be converted. In other words, God saw them, he chose them, his Son died for them, the authority to secure them has been secured at the cross and the mission will reap them eventually. That’s why he could encourage Paul, “Go forth. They are out there. You can reap them as you go.”

This commission is great because the foundation guarantees the fruit. We know that a king’s edict, we know that a closed country, we know that a recession, will not stall the mission. All authority in heaven and on earth means that we have been entrusted with a mission that doesn’t stop. It is an unstoppable mission.

## **2. Our commission is *great* because it extends to the Church.**

You say, “Well, Dave, I only see eleven men there in verse 16.” Verse 16 says, “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.” Yes. The Great Commission is given originally to the 11, but it is given to them not simply as individuals, but with their different roles in view. How often in the Old Testament God would address a leader not only in their role as king or prophet or leader, but also in their role as representing the people of God? Well, the Great Commission is given to the apostles, but it

is also given to the apostles as they represent the New Testament church and the church in all the age.

And I say that because the scope of the commission moves well beyond the 11 and to the Church. Let me just give you three quick reasons why I am seeing that in this passage.

**Geography.** First, notice the target of the Great Commission, “all the nations.” Let’s just think about that for a second. Is it even possible that these 11 could go to all nations? I think not.

**Duration.** It is supposed to last to the end of the age. Were the 11 disciples going to be around to the end of the age? I don’t think they were. And so the “you” that is referenced in verses 20 and 21, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded *you* and behold I am with *you* always,” apparently refers to people beyond the 11.

**Continuation.** Lastly, I would offer to you that we need to examine the application of the Great Commission in the New Testament. If Acts and the New Testament are a chronicle of how the disciples understood this, it was then not just highly motivated individuals becoming a grass roots revolution preaching the gospel to all nations. There is so much written today that elevates the individual and marginalizes the church. But we find in the New Testament the churches are at the center of missions. Churches emerge as the fruit of missions. Local churches are the fruit, and focus, and fuel, of missions. When God wants to begin his invasion to the Gentile world he starts in the church at Antioch. It is really revolving around local churches.

And, sadly, we live in a day where there has been a divorce between the church and the Great Commission. In fact, I want to return you to a quote that I have used before by George Peters to illustrate this point. He once said, “The history of the church in missions is, in the main, the history of great personalities and of missionary societies. Only in exceptional cases has it been the church in missions.”

See, so much of contemporary missiology is built around great personalities. So much of contemporary missiology is built around the exceptional missionaries of history, amazing men and women who made incredible sacrifices. We stand on their shoulders and thank God for the vision that God gave them to take the gospel to other places. When it comes to mobilizing a church planting movement like Sovereign Grace Ministries, they certainly provide inspiration, and an example of godliness and sacrifice, but they are not necessarily models for the church’s role in the Great Commission.

The commission is great because it has not just the 11, but the church, in view. Listen to how John Piper says it. He said, “It was not merely given to the apostles for their ministry, but it was given to the church for its ministry as long as this age lasts.”

The way I like to understand the audience for the Great Commission is this: *The 11 got it, the church finishes it*. Which raises an important question. How does the church finish the Great Commission?

And that takes us to our next point.

### **3. Our commission is *great* because Christ provides the strategy.**

***Strategy 1: Planting local churches.*** And the first part of that strategy is by planting local churches. The origins for church planting are seen in the shadows of Matthew chapter 28. Think about the ingredients of the commission itself, think about what Jesus is commanding his disciples to do—“Go. Make disciples. Baptize. Teach.”

Now, admittedly, “going” and “baptizing” can be applied pretty randomly, but when we move to “teaching,” attempting to “make disciples,” then we see in the New Testament makes the context visible. And when we survey the New Testament for how this actually worked we find teaching centered in elderships and discipleship taking place in the local church. Actually we can argue that baptism, as an ordinance of the church, assumes the church as well. Three of the four of those ingredients of the commission go to the church.

And the challenge that we confront in Evangelicalism today is that a lot of the Great Commission has been reduced down to “going” and “baptizing.” The Great Commission becomes like a buffet where we walk through and take what we want. “Oh, my, this looks delicious. I will take a little ‘going.’ I will take a little ‘baptizing.’ I don’t want any ‘teaching’ or ‘making disciples.’ That is so cumbersome, so inexpedient, it upsets my stomach.”

See, part of my story as a new believer is that it became evident that missions was something that was always enjoyed outside of the local church. And when it came time to do missions there was this inexplicable exodus of zealous Christians *out* of the church because there seemed to be assumptions. The church worships, the church fellowships, the church cares, but missions is something that should be done outside of the church and without the hindrance of the church.

You know, just as an aside, if we focus all our attention on finding the next David Brainerd, then our goal becomes to raise up and multiply individuals, and actually the advance of the gospel gets bottlenecked around individuals. But if our focus becomes the church and our impact is in attempting to reproduce the church, then we are reproducing churches for the glory of God.

We must embrace the full scope of Matthew 28. “Going” without “making disciples” is an aborted commission. “Baptizing” without “teaching” is birth without growth. If my mission strategy is simply to relocate to Latin America or Eritrea or somewhere in Asia, to simply preach the Gospel—and that is a commendable impulse, we applaud it, we thank God that that impulse exists—I may only be “going” and “baptizing” and not taking the full commis-

sion with me. For our commission to be great it must embrace all of the ingredients of Matthew 28. For our commission to be great we must have more than preaching good news, we must be creating new communities.

See, this is why the study of missions in the New Testament is really about churches and church planting. This is why Paul was sent from local churches and received into churches. It is why Paul's labors resulted in churches and his letters were addressed to churches. It is why the aim of missions is never separated from the church, but to result in the church. This is why we are taking so much time and investing so much effort in refining our church planting process and developing our church planting program, where we now have internships that are available not only for people inside of Sovereign Grace, but for those outside of Sovereign Grace that feel called and aligned with Sovereign Grace. It is why we have residents for after the Pastor's College so men can be specifically trained in church planting. It is why we have a church planting conference on the books for next October (called "Plant") to be training and equipping church planters and pastors that want their churches to plant churches.

See, it is not about the expansion of a franchise. This is about a small family of churches that want to play their part in the Great Commission and want to see the Great Commission as truly *great*.

***Strategy 2: Apostolic ministry.*** As we study the book of Acts, we see that apostolic ministry orchestrates the planting of churches and seems to be responsible for leading gospel centered missions. In the New Testament apostles go. In the New Testament apostle provide leadership for missions. So as you hear C.J. talking about 23 counties that Sovereign Grace is presently involved in, we thank God for that stat. It is in an incomprehensible stat to us. But what I want you to understand is that this has taken place primarily through the expansion and circulation of apostolic ministry (along with some very patient people in Sovereign Grace Ministries that have prayed and cried out to God that these days would come).

Apostolic ministry—Ephesians 4 apostolic ministry—is why we don't find Paul just moving through churches mobilizing all believers to go into the field. Nor do we see the Great Commission applied in the New Testament in a way that recruits all believers and launches all believers out into the field. *Rather, we see churches that are local and apostles that are mobile.*

Now, for the benefit of our guests, there isn't time to tell you all of the differences that exist between the apostles of Scripture and what we believe apostolic ministry is today. But in one area there is a similarity, in leading the mission into new regions for the gospel.

So Paul says in Romans 15:20, "and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation." He is talking to the Corinthians and he says, he talks about his goal to "preach the gospel in lands beyond you" (2 Corinthians 10:16). So that is part of what effective apostolic ministry

should be doing. It should be leading us beyond our present regions, beyond our present spheres, to new places where the gospel could be proclaimed.

Now, does this mean that the activity in foreign fields that is not apostolic ministry is not legitimate? Not at all. For example, who could do what Wycliffe does? Their role and their work are irreplaceable. In fact, there are certain areas of expertise (medicine, translation, and certain features of business) that make a vital contribution to the mission field. It is not like every time a medical team is formed we think, “We must have an apostle on that team.” No, we would rather have a doctor on the team.

Here is the challenge, though. It is hard to find evidence in Scripture where these things happen independent of the church or independent of apostolic ministry. Now that doesn’t mean—please hear this—that doesn’t mean that we are *not* grateful for every penny that is sent to support missions, or every person that goes on short term mission work, or dedicates themselves to more long term service. Nor do we doubt that the fruit that comes of this is genuine fruit that glorifies God. It just means that activities are closest to the pattern in Scripture when they flow out of the strategy that Christ gave: Missions flowing from the church, and missions influenced by gifted and theologically-informed church leadership.

And, by the way, just because Hudson Taylor and David Brainerd and John Paton didn’t use the term “apostolic” doesn’t mean that they weren’t apostolic. Can we just recognize right out of the gate that they had more apostolic game than anything we bring to the field?

## **Global missions**

Let me address just another important strategy question. Does Sovereign Grace Ministries want to play a part in reaching unreached people groups? Absolutely. Do we want to see leaders raised up within Sovereign Grace Ministries and called to that field? Absolutely. Please pray for us because this is an area that requires our prayerful attention. We feel very young. We feel very inexperienced. We are very hopeful, but we feel very inexperienced. But we also recognize that being young and inexperienced is not a “get out of jail free” card that springs us from our responsibility to be looking and examining that. In fact, right now we are developing a proposal so Sovereign Grace can be more involved in reaching unreached people groups.

But let me just take a few minutes here and bring you into some of the important things that we are learning and have learned through our experience. I share these with you not because these are hard and fast rules that are governing the way we go forward; in fact I offer them to you to stimulate some interaction. It may be that the way you are thinking about these things can help us sharpen how we think about these things. So I throw these out here as an interpretation of our experience over the last 25 years.

I have three different lessons I want to throw out.

***Lesson 1: The strategy of relocating westerners to non-western countries seems to have more weaknesses than strengths.*** Some of you may not be aware of this, because not all of us were around back in the 1980s, but this was our first missiological strategy. We sent a team of westerners to the Philippines. We did a similar thing in Mexico City. It may have been our ignorance, it may have been our inexperience, but it did not bear quantifiable fruit.

And what is interesting is that in circles of missiology others are beginning to see the limitations of that model and raising good, important, and penetrating questions amidst a growing criticism and a call for reevaluation of that model.

Now, listen. I want to be real clear on this. That doesn't mean we don't respect those who do this. But we are discovering that as we send apostolic ministry, God is connecting us with quality, indigenous leaders from around the world. And, by the way, I don't want to leave the impression that all the initiative is coming from us. Often, and increasingly, we are simply responding to invitations that are coming to us from different parts of the world.

***Lesson 2: The strategy of investing in indigenous leaders seems to be working.*** So we want to look first for those who already know the language and culture of a particular nation whom God in his sovereignty has already positioned in that nation and connect with them and serve them in the labors that God has already begun through them.

See, I could take the next 10 years to learn the native tongue of Myanmar (Burma). Actually, I couldn't do that, because I don't have an aptitude for language. But there are some of us here that could do that. And then I, or one of you, could circulate throughout Sovereign Grace and raise tens of thousands of dollars to support you in that effort, both in the language training phase, in the visa processes, in travel expenses, and then the living expenses once you get over there. And then we could send you over there, or send me over there, and I can stick out like an awkward tourist amidst a people that I am much different from. Or we could take that time and that money and invest it in David, who attended the Pastor's College, who was raised in Myanmar, who understands the culture, who is already planting churches in that culture, who is already going to unreached people groups in that culture. We can take him, train him, invest in him and we can see the Great Commission take root among Sovereign Grace by investing in somebody like that—an indigenous leader who is already there, who already knows the language, who already knows the culture, who is already positioned to go forward for the glory of God.

Our hope is not in planting westerners in countries around the world. Our hope is in finding and funding and training indigenous leaders.

Which leads to the final lesson that we are learning.

***Lesson 3: The Pastor's College strategy seems to be working for expansion.*** Jeff, Pete, and I were in Germany recently, sitting with Wolfgang's elder. As they were drawing him all

out about the Pastor's College, Jeff mentioned that 81% of the men that have passed through the Pastor's College are serving fruitfully in ministry right now. That's a staggering statistic.

We are just about to roll out the revised Mexican edition of the Pastor's College. But what I want you to see is that this is the beginning of something very important that goes to our strategic plan for the future. Our hope is to start Pastor's Colleges in the UK, Europe, Africa, Asia, in all places throughout the world.

Training pastors and training church planters both inside and outside of the United States seems to be part of the call of God that is upon Sovereign Grace Ministries. Which is why it is such a privilege to open slots in the Pastor's College for men from Ethiopia and South Korea and Russia and Brazil and Bolivia and Germany and Mexico and the Bahamas and India. That is not our only international work, but that may be our most important and most significant international work because some of these men will be in a position to reach those nations. And some of them may be in a position to start Pastor's Colleges within those nations. And so by training them and investing in them we are moving together towards "all the nations of the earth." That is Christ's strategy and that is how we are seeking to apply it here in the little world of Sovereign Grace Ministries.

#### **4. Our commission is *great* because we can all participate.**

Let's just look at one New Testament example of how the Great Commission worked in one area and called upon everyone. I just want to pause for a second and linger over this passage and what is actually being said here. In Romans 15:19 Paul said, "so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ." He says, "I have fulfilled it. It is done over there. I have completed it."

By the way, Illyricum is the region above Macedonia that ran parallel to Italy. He said, "In that area it is done. It has been accomplished."

Now here is something we have to wrestle with. What is it that creates that sense of accomplishment so that Paul can make that astonishing statement? Was it that Paul had preached the gospel to every lost soul in that area? Was it that Paul had recruited and mobilized 10,000 Great Commission workers? Was it that he had mastered the contemporary technology in order to get the gospel into every household? And, by the way, some of those are commendable ambitions. All I am saying is that they weren't part of Paul's strategy resulting in the statement that "I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ."

This extraordinary statement can only be assigned to one reality—Paul had started local churches. In fact, if you map that statement on to the biblical geography you see that the Thessalonian church had begun; Philippi church, begun; Corinth church, begun; Ephesus church, begun. Churches had been started along the entire arc of that region. So Paul considered the ministry of the gospel of Christ *fulfilled* when a church had been solidly planted.

Now, just to punctuate this point I want you to listen to some guys that are far brighter than I am. Douglas Moo said,

Paul claims that he has brought to completion in the regions designated his own special apostolic task of planting strategic churches. As Knox puts it, he could say that he had completed the preaching of the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum only because this statement would have meant for him that the message had been proclaimed and the church planted in each of the nations north and west across Asia Minor and the Greek Peninsula, proclaimed widely enough and planted firmly enough to assure the name of Christ would soon be heard throughout its borders.

Now this starts to stagger the mind a little bit, doesn't it?

P. T. O'Brien says,

There are three things that Paul has in view when he makes that statement. Number one, he had started strong churches. Number two, the churches were in strategic centers. Number three, the churches would accept responsibility for their region.

So what is the strategy for the completed Great Commission from Romans chapter 15? It is apostolic ministry planting strategic churches and then those local churches mobilized to penetrate their region.

Do you know what this means? This means we can all participate. It is just a matter of whether it is local or extra local, sending or being sent. But we can all participate. And do you know what? We need Great Commission motivation that inspires some to go and Great Commission motivation that inspires most to stay so that they can participate in accepting responsibility for their region.

Please don't make the mistake that I made as a new believer, that the only way to participate in the Great Commission is by getting your passport stamped. Most Christians participate in the Great Commission by supporting their local church, by reaching non-Christians in their area, and by supporting those called to lead into new fields.

Let me throw another quote at you. These are so good that I needed to get them to you. Everett Harrison in *The Expositor's Commentary* said,

The statement, "I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ," is not intended to mean that he had preached in every community between the two points mentioned, but that he had faithfully preached the message in the major communities along the way, leaving to his converts the more intensified evangelizing of surrounding districts.

Now let's tease this out a little bit and think through the implications of this for Sovereign Grace Ministries' churches. This has some punch, this has some grab, it makes a claim. This

means that for the pastors that are here today, we must realize that there is a mission beyond caring for the church. Yes, we are shepherds, but we are shepherds that have a mission. I am not saying that we exalt the mission. But that is not a risk in Sovereign Grace Ministries. If we are going to drift, it is not going to be a drift towards “missional,” it is going to be doxological or something, which is not quite as cutting edge.

Wayne Grudem makes the appeal that we must have inward, upward, and outward blended together for a church to be healthy. He says, “We should be aware of any attempts to reduce the purpose of the church to only one of these three [inward, outward, upward] and to say that it should be our primary focus.” So what shepherds do is they work to blend the inward, the outward and the upward. We will not secure the health of our movement or the health of our local church without a proportional attention to each of these.

So it means that pastors must see that there is a mission beyond caring for the church. It also means that pastors must define health not simply through care, not simply through great small groups, but through planting churches and by local outreach. That has got to be on the screen of the senior pastors and of pastoral teams. Romans 15 is clear that starting a church is not the divine gotcha for each people group, but churches also owning the responsibility for their region.

Remember what Everett Harrison said? “Leaving to his converts the more intensified evangelizing of surrounding differences.” And not just local outreach. May God inspire in the hearts of pastoral teams in Sovereign Grace to have churches planting churches, pastors that are willing to step up and play a part in the Great Commission by sending out people so that the gospel can be proclaimed.

### **Great sacrifice**

It is very natural to think that the best way to preserve the church is to guard the resources of the church, and to protect God’s people from risk. And there will always be good reasons *not* to plant a particular church. Church planting is like having kids. If you wait for the perfect time you never have kids.

Just think, by the way, of the backdrop of church planting in the New Testament. Those weren’t the best times for church planting. There is always a reason to keep Paul in Antioch. He is too strategic. He is an amazing teacher. Anyone but Paul. In other words, there is always a reason *not* to plant churches. But for the commission to be great the local church must have life and it must exist for something outside of itself. The church has to exist to reproduce itself, not to terminate upon itself, but to reproduce itself, both locally and extra locally. And that is part of what the Great Commission does—it lifts our eyes up above ourselves and gets them on the field. First, the local field, and then the field beyond as well. And a good pastoral team is ever working to raise the gaze of their people above themselves.

If I could just boast on the Philly guys for a second. In October Jared Mellinger replaced me as senior pastor. What is so cool about this storyline is that three months after Jared replaced me as senior pastor, he announced in Covenant Fellowship Church that they were sending out Kenny Lynch to plant a church. Kenny is one of the most gifted guys on the team in Covenant Fellowship Church. I am based in Philadelphia. I understand the church. And I see the lay of the land in the area. I could make a strong case that we must stabilize the church in the midst of the transition, that there is a recession by the way, that this is not a good time to sacrifice a large giving base or the strength of the plurality in the interest of the mission. And why would we ever send out Kenny of all people, who is at the heart of the team?

And yet Jared and the pastoral team wanted to make a different statement. They wanted to make a different statement to God. They wanted to make a different statement to each other. They wanted to make a different statement to the church that the Great Commission is great to the new senior pastor as well as the old senior pastor. The Great Commission is great because it is worth the sacrifices that are taken in order to move it forward.

### **Growth through conversion**

This means that we are defining success as a movement not just by a growing church, but by a church growing through conversions.

Mark Dever said we must protect the practice of evangelism. But I want to say that protecting the practice of evangelism should influence how we staff, how we build, and how we define success in the local church. The future of our local churches depends not simply upon growth, but upon *evangelistic* growth. Transfer growth will not do. Too many churches enjoy growth through the movement of Christians from one church to the next church.

I remember reading a book by William Chadwick where he said the shifting of the saints from one church to another is killing the church. Our only hope for the future is to include conversions in the way we interpret success, to change the way we are looking at the church so that we measure success by how many people have been converted in this ministry, in this local church.

Folks that study this stuff believe that a conversion rate of 25% or higher is necessary if churches are to make any impact in the world for Jesus Christ. So senior pastors, pastoral teams, what steps do you need to make to establish that as a goal, to move the church towards the 25% mark? What changes need to be made? If a sense of responsibility is settling on your shoulders, that's good. In fact, that's great. It is called the *Great Commission*.

Final point:

**5. Our commission is *great* because it comes with the promise of God's enduring presence.**

Verse 20. “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Is there a more comforting promise that God not only precedes us, that he has gone before us and prepared good works beforehand (Ephesians 2:10), and he accompanies us in our going? Can anything thrill the hearts of the 9 church planters in Sovereign Grace Ministries starting churches over the next year more than “I am with you always”?

See, we tend to isolate and extract that verse from the context and slap it on all kinds of situations. I think it does have broad relevance. But in the context of this passage the promise means that God is with us *in our going*. God is with us *as we go*. So as we seek to plant churches, God is with us. As we go out into new lands, God is with us. As you reach out to your neighbors across the street, God is with us.

And there is an extraordinary setup throughout the Great Commission where God goes before us and then he returns to accompany us. And you know how often he is there as we go? “I am with you *always*.”

We don't have time to go to the beginning of Matthew, but Matthew 1 starts with the announcement of Emmanuel, God with us. And the end of Matthew reminds us that not only is he with us, but he is hanging around for the mission part of the program. We don't go forth alone, we don't make sacrifices alone, Emmanuel is there. God is with us. Jesus is with us as long as we go, even to the end of the age. Maybe that is why he could mobilize disciples, even though some doubted, because he would be with them. Maybe there was a sense where he was saying to them, “Do you know what? I will be with you. I know your doubts, but your doubts will be resolved in your going because my presence is with you.”

Do you have any doubts? Christ is with us. Do you have any doubts that your church can make a difference, that your church can actually raise the number of conversions? The Savior is with us. Do you have any doubts that your people can gain an enthusiasm to actually become a church planting church? The Savior is with us in our going. I think there is great benefit in having somebody around who has all authority in heaven and on earth!

## **Conclusion**

I'll have to admit to you that in my understanding of Matthew chapter 28 has made the Great Commission even greater to me, greater than when I zealously stood tall at the Keith Green memorial concert. I have realized now that I could still be vitally involved in a commission that is made truly *great*. It is *great* because it comes from one with *great* authority. It is *great* because it is entrusted to a *great* church. It is *great* because it calls on us all for some essential tasks. It is *great* because it carries a *great* promise even to the end of the age.

Ultimately, Matthew chapter 28 finds its greatness because it brings great glory to our *great* God. And that is why it is a *Great* Commission.

Let's pray.

## **Closing prayer**

*Father, we want to thank you for this commission that has been entrusted in some way to each of us. Holy Spirit, I pray you would come now, inspire leaders in this room with a desire for personal evangelism. Lord, I pray you would inspire me more that way. I do not believe I have been a good example. I pray that you would help me to have a vision for the Great Commission in my neighborhood. But, Lord, I also pray that you would grip the heart of pastoral teams in this room and that they would possess a vision to plant churches for your glory, to link arms to see the Great Commission spread not only in their community and not only in their state, but throughout this country, and other countries throughout the world. Lord, we thank you that you have included us in on such an exciting thing. But we don't thank you primarily because it is a great adventure that we are on, we thank you because you suffered and sacrificed yourself on our behalf and that by going forth we are announcing the good news of you dying and rising again. Help us in that end in Jesus' name. Amen.*