

Chapter 17: Jesus and the Great Commission¹

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In his widely-read book *On Being a Christian*, Hans Kung reminds us that the “most fundamental characteristic of Christianity” is that it regards Jesus as “definitive” and “ultimately decisive”. In answering the question “Which Christ?” of the many versions of Jesus currently available, Kung declares that it is the “concrete,” “historical” Jesus, whose history can be “located” and “dated,”² crucified yet alive, who still calls men and women to faith and discipleship. Thus it will continue until the end of time if those who call themselves his followers today will take seriously Jesus’ last words to his first disciples –his command to go into all the world with the gospel.

We now face an urgent and insistent question: How should we respond? What are we to do with this Jesus who cannot be ignored without compromising our own integrity or identity? Jesus himself has already provided the answer to this most pressing question. His last recorded words to the disciples who had witnessed firsthand all that he said and did, including his death and resurrection, contain the answer for us as it did for them. Jesus commanded them to go into all the world with the gospel message and make more disciples. The exact words of the Great Commission are unambiguously simple: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20, NKJV).

The Great Commission raises three fundamental questions, each of them requiring urgent attention if we are serious about Jesus and his will for the church and for the world. What does the Great Commission mean? Who does it include? And how can it be accomplished? In attempting to answer these questions and explore their relevance for professing Christians in the twenty-first century, we must first accept that mission is foundational to the very nature of the church as well as to Christ’s own declared purposes. Jon Dybdal observes, “If the church ceases to be missionary, it has not simply

1 First published as the final chapter in *The Essential Jesus*, 2002. Abridged and included here by permission of Pacific Press Publishing Association, Nampa, Idaho, USA.

2 Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins, 1978), 123, 146, 148.

failed in its task, but has actually ceased from being the church”.³ It would not be difficult to find a dozen similar statements. The church exists for mission.

Before we explore these questions, a word about terminology. Three related words appear in the following pages. Two of them, “mission” and “witness”, are used frequently, and often synonymously, although strictly speaking mission is broader than witness. Mission is the task of the church. Witness is what the church and Christians do in order to accomplish mission. Witness can take many forms, one of them being evangelism in both its broad and narrower senses. We shall argue that as witness is essential to mission, so evangelism, both broadly and narrowly understood, is essential to witness. Since all are applicable and necessary everywhere in the world, Max Warren can say that “the word ‘missionary’ is to be understood as applying to anyone, anywhere”⁴, who is motivated by the Great Commission.

Rediscovering the Great Commission

What does it mean, then, this final word from Jesus to his disciples? How shall we understand it, initially as it was given to the first disciples and then for ourselves, his disciples in the contemporary world? Only as we listen to it carefully, coming direct from Scripture, free from the weight of tradition, bias, or denominational pride, can we grasp again its immense and compelling significance.

The words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 28:19, 20 were delivered at one of several post-resurrection appearances, at most of which Jesus spoke of the task awaiting His disciples. Parallel passages are Mark 16:15-18 and Luke 24:46-49. They reflect similar words spoken by Jesus on other occasions between the resurrection and the ascension, as do also John 20:21, 11 and Acts 1:8. Matthew 24:14 is also particularly relevant. These passages all relate to the Great Commission and Christ’s intention for his disciples, and they need to be studied together, although Matthew 28:19, 20 remains the basic text.

While the Authorised Version at Matthew 28:19 begins with the familiar words “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations”, most modern versions agree that the word here rendered “teach” should be translated “make disciples of”. The Revised Authorised and New International Versions both retain the imperative and read, “Go and make disciples of all nations”. Lenski says that “teach” is an “unfortunate and even misleading translation” for those who

3 Jon L. Dybdahl, “Adventist Mission Today”, in Jon L. Dybdahl (ed), *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1999), 18.

4 Max Warren, *I Believe in the Great Commission* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), 173.

do not have access to the original.⁵ Howard Snyder insists that “disciple-making” means “teaching believers to follow Jesus and live the life of the kingdom that he taught and lived before them”, while according to another view discipleship requires “belief in Jesus and transformation of life”⁶. So more than instruction is enjoined by the Great Commission. It also calls for decision and commitment. It encompasses the entire process of leading men and women to become authentic disciples of Jesus, “obedient followers”, to borrow Lenski’s pithy phrase.

The other side of this coin, however, is equally significant. Making disciples also includes teaching or the impartation of knowledge. To pass over the debate as to whether this instruction should precede or follow baptism (the answer surely is both), the essential point to grasp here is that true Christian faith is rooted in understanding. A disciple is a person who has been instructed and enlightened in coming to faith. The Greek word in verse 20 (from *didasko*) clearly means to teach, but even the word in verse 19 (from *matheteuo*) carries with it the underlying idea of instruction. Kittel refers to the “unambiguous” sense of teaching or instruction, “the impartation of practical or theoretical knowledge” implicit in this passage and says of verse 20 “the risen Lord made the continuation of this task the life work of his people”⁷. It is not possible to be a true disciple of Jesus with an empty mind.

Some contemporary Christian writers are speaking again of apologetics, the defence or explanation of Christian faith. The concept is crucial if the Great Commission is to be accomplished in the Western world. Apologetics proposes the reasons for believing in Christ and for being his disciples and suggests answers to possible objections. Informed Christians become informed through the process of apologetics. Alister McGrath declares that one of the important tasks of apologetics is “explanation”, in the context of a secular society that is increasingly ignorant of the basic truths of Christianity and in which “half-truths, misconceptions, and caricatures abound”⁸. The world needs to hear, loud and clear, repeatedly and uncompromisingly, what Christian faith really is.

In Acts 1:8 we find three further elements of the divine mandate for mis-

5 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1964), 1172.

6 Howard Snyder, *Liberating the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1983), 24; Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1983), 252.

7 G. Kittel (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), II (1964), 138, 135, 145.

8 Alister McGrath, “Starting Where People Are”, in Michael Green and Alister McGrath, *How Shall We Reach Them?* (Milton Keynes, UK: Word, 1995), 20.

sion. Jesus also said to his disciples, in the context of the promised Holy Spirit, “You shall . . . be witnesses to Me . . . to the end of the earth” (NKJV). We shall return later to two of these crucial factors. For the present, the key word here is “witnesses”. It has been pointed out frequently that this word refers to those who testify from personal experience. One of the most trusted New Testament exegetes of the twentieth century says that it “denotes one who declares facts directly known to himself”, one who speaks from “his own direct knowledge” about people or events he has observed personally⁹. The disciples of Jesus were to be witnesses to facts, but also to the meaning of those facts. Their word was to be testimony and evangelistic confession.

The facts in question “are the facts of the history of Jesus . . . which took place in the clear light of history at a specific time and place, facts which can be established and on which one can rely”. They must be attested to and their significance must be explained.¹⁰ Those are qualified to be witnesses who could, and who still can, vouch for the objectivity of these facts and explain their continuing redemptive significance. They are witnesses in the legal and biblical senses. On their testimony the lives of others may depend. This is what Acts 1:8 means when it speaks of witnesses.

Further relevance may be found in John’s account. On the evening of the resurrection day Jesus met with a small group of his disciples and began immediately to point them toward the future. “As the Father hath sent me, I also send you”, he declared (John 20:21, NKJV). This is probably the genesis of the Great Commission which finds its fullest expression at a later meeting between Jesus and a larger group of disciples and which, as we have noted, is recorded in Matthew 28:19, 20. Lenski relates this text specifically to the Great Commission and renders it “As the Father has commissioned me, I, too, am sending you”.¹¹ While his death and resurrection are still vivid in their minds, on the day of the resurrection and on the first occasion thereafter when Jesus met with the disciples, he focuses their attention on what their response must be to these momentous events. It shows just how vital mission was both to him and to them.

There is more here, however, that relates to effective witness. Jesus sends his disciples into the world “as the Father” had sent him. It is not coincidental that this particular emphasis is found in John’s account. It reflects the earlier emphases in this same Gospel where there is repeated reference to the “sending” of the Son by the Father (John 3:16, 17; 6:38, 39; 9:4; 12:49, 50). These texts are all to be seen in the light of John’s unique and powerful first chapter where the sent Word becomes flesh and comes down to his own

9 Kittel, *Theological Dictionary*, IV (1967), 492, 489.

10 *Ibid.*, 492.

11 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1943), 1368-69.

for their enlightenment and redemption. Jesus' own mission has an incarnational character. He was sent from the Father to be one with humankind, to identify and be identified with them. It is a truth of the utmost significance for those who are now sent by Jesus into the twenty-first-century world. To be sent as Christ was sent is to be sent incarnationally into the world. We ignore this truth at great loss, even to ineffectiveness.

Matthew 24:14 presents us with a further factor of great significance in attempting to grasp the intent of the Great Commission for mission in our time. Here, where Jesus refers to the final, end-time gospel proclamation, a particular phrase is used to describe the gospel that is then to be proclaimed "as a witness to all nations". It is not merely "the gospel" without clarification. It is specifically the gospel "of the kingdom". Again, this can be understood adequately – and must be so understood – only in the light of what Matthew has said previously.

Matthew has already written much about the kingdom. There are more than fifty such references in his Gospel, many of them sayings of Jesus himself. Matthew even uses this same phrase, "the gospel of the kingdom", on other occasions (4:24; 9:35). It was in fact this "gospel of the kingdom" which Jesus himself proclaimed, the good news that God's kingdom had already arrived in his person and which figures prominently in his own proclamation. As has been shown repeatedly over the past fifty or sixty years, this was the central thrust of Jesus' own teaching – the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matt. 4:17; 10:7; Mark 1:15); it has, in Jesus himself, already "drawn near". The parables of the kingdom (Matt. 13 and 25) are parables of a kingdom that, while yet to come in its finality, is also ready present. It is *this* kingdom that is at the heart of the gospel. It is the good news concerning *this* kingdom that is to be preached as a witness to all nations in the end-time proclamation.

We must not allow the force of this essential truth to elude us any longer. The kingdom of the future emerges from a kingdom that is already present. They are one and the same kingdom, now in time, then in eternity. To preach only, or even mainly, a future kingdom is to distort the very gospel of Jesus. The church exists as the agent to bring this kingdom continually into being, to demonstrate the presence and the nature of this kingdom and to extend it by mission.

The kingdom, therefore, becomes the focus of true mission, the genesis, the vehicle, and the consummation of the gospel and the Great Commission itself. Beyerhaus understands the church's responsibility to be to "hasten the visible establishment of Christ's kingdom on earth", noting the relationship of this task to the coming of the Lord. "Only when this work is complete will

Christ come to redeem the groaning creation from its present bondage".¹² The gospel of *the kingdom*, proclaimed throughout the world, makes this ultimately possible. We must in all honesty ask ourselves if we have been faithful to the gospel which is described in Matthew 24:14. Or have we been content with something less, the message of half a kingdom, the kingdom which is yet to come, perhaps?

Finally, the extent of the task confronts us again: "Witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth", "to all nations", to the "end of the age". For two millennia the church has, more or less, been driven by this vision. Christian believers can now be found all over the world. It would be easy to think that the task is almost done, and indeed it may be. But we must not forget that the command to preach the gospel and make disciples in all nations applies to peoples and localities where the church already exists, as well as those over the seas. It includes new generations in countries and cultures that have been regarded as Christian for centuries but in reality are not so any longer. In this respect it is imperative to hear again the cry of the lost in the Western world. It is here more than anywhere that the Great Commission needs immediate resurrection. The Christian church here is having little, if any, effect on society. Adventist missiologist, Jon Dybdahl, speaks of the "mission malaise of the First-world church", specifically in Western Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand.¹³ The secular humanist and the secular materialist are as far removed from the Christ of Scripture as the devout Hindu, the Moslem fundamentalist, and the unenlightened Animist. They, too, must hear.

This chapter then is largely and unapologetically a response to this noxious malaise. It is a condition which must be countered rapidly if the church, indeed Christianity as a whole, is to remain what it claims to be, the body of Christ with a message for all humankind. While much of what is said here, of course, will also be relevant to the church elsewhere in the world, the "appalling lostness" of the secular millions in the West,¹⁴ to borrow John Stott's evocative phrase, cannot go unheeded.

So from these seminal passages in Matthew 28, Acts 1, John 20 and Matthew 13 and 24, we can recapture what it is that Jesus wanted his disciples to accomplish. There is much more that can be drawn from these texts and others that are also relevant, and some of it will be said later. But can we not confidently declare that in essence Jesus commanded his disciples to go

12 Peter Beyerhaus, "World Evangelisation and the Kingdom of God", in J. D. Douglas (ed), *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis, MN: World-Wide, 1974), 285.

13 Dybdahl, *Adventist Mission*, 18.

14 John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (London: Falcon, 1975), 108.

incarnationally into the world with the gospel of a kingdom already present as well as yet to come; that he bade them witness to all nations and cultures, making other disciples – men, women and young people who would come to understand who Jesus is and why he came to earth, and who would gladly respond affirmatively to his gospel invitation and in turn become witnesses and disciple-makers? There may indeed be more, but certainly nothing less than this is acceptable, either in understanding the Great Commission or in putting it into effect. It is this momentous task that remains “the central mission”, the “great charter” of the church.¹⁵

Refocusing on Responsibility

We must now turn without flinching to the question of responsibility. It arises inevitably from the very nature of the Great Commission, especially when applied to our own time and to our specific location, wherever that may be. To whom is the Great Commission given? Who are those who are commanded by Jesus to go and make disciples? Are any excluded?

It is helpful here to remember the relationship between kingdom and church. The church is the created community of the kingdom and this community is the agent of the kingdom. Snyder says that the church “exists for the kingdom of God”¹⁶, a position we can accept more readily when we remember also the eschatological future of that kingdom. Bonhoeffer stated “the Church is the Church only when it exists for others”¹⁷, i.e. to extend the kingdom on earth by intentional, focused mission and witness by which others accept Jesus and become His disciples. Although Jesus spoke much more about the kingdom than he did about the church as such, he nonetheless envisaged the church’s existence and its future in declaring that the gates of hell would not prevail against it and that he had entrusted to the church the keys of that kingdom (Matt. 16:18, 19). *The church now has the keys to this kingdom*. It is an awesome responsibility that many voices throughout the Christian centuries have emphatically sought to underline, including many in our own time. We must not ignore them.

Charles van Engen deplores the current situation in which in the minds of many Christians “church” and “mission” are often seen as distinct and conflicting ideas. He contends emphatically that to understand the church as principally a missionary organization “is not optional”, proposing that the church “is being obedient when it can be found out in the main thorough-

15 Roger Hedlund, *The Mission of the Church in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 190; *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald), 5(1956), 557.

16 Snyder, *Liberating the Church*, 24.

17 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 203.

fares and the streets, inviting everyone to the eschatological wedding feast of the Lamb".¹⁸ Roger Hedlund insists that "we cannot escape the obligation to carry the gospel to the nations", declaring that the Great Commission is "the essential mission of the church".¹⁹ Michael Green says it is "incumbent" upon Christians to spread the good news.²⁰ Some see a negative attitude to mission in the Western church manifesting itself in a "Little Bo-Peep" mentality which believes that the lost sheep will come home on their own.²¹ Clearly, they will not. They must be brought home.

Much of the foregoing reminds us of a statement made many years ago but which now seems remarkably pertinent once again: "The church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men. It was organized for service, and its mission is to carry the gospel to the world".²² Few would actually disagree with that. Most, in fact, would wholeheartedly agree in theory. The challenge comes in translating theory into practice, particularly for churches in which it has become comfortable to be nominally Christian and where it is easier for the majority of members to sit in the pews during the worship service and remain silent for the rest of the week.

Perhaps the problem and its resolution lie in part at least in the balance between nurture and mission. In recent years there has been an increasing emphasis on nurturing activities designed to keep alive the often-flickering flame of the local congregation. At a time when secularism and materialism increasingly erode the foundations of the faith, it is entirely understandable. The argument that nurture is an essential prerequisite to witness is persuasive. But how far does it go before the balance becomes untenable? Snyder believes that the church "gets into trouble whenever it thinks it is in church business rather than in kingdom business".²³ The point is clearly valid. It is possible to become more concerned with the life of those in the local congregation than with the death of those in the surrounding community. By "kingdom business" Snyder means activities which are specifically directed at extending the kingdom of God by sharing the good news of Jesus and the kingdom with those who have not yet heard it or not yet responded.

Gavin Reid, an Anglican who became disillusioned with the failure of

18 Charles van Engen, *God's Missionary People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991), 28, 76, 81.

19 Hedlund, *Mission of the Church*, 188, 190.

20 In David Watson, *I Believe in Evangelism* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), 9.

21 Cited in David Haney, *The Idea of the Laity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1973), 141-42.

22 E. G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1911), 9.

23 Snyder, *Liberating the Church*, 11.

his congregation to make any significant impact on the community, wrote a book with the provocative title *The Gaggling of God*. Proposing that the church, by its ineffectiveness, was actually preventing God's message from reaching the community, Reid suggested three reasons for this situation, the third of which is "the accelerating introversion of practically all forms of Christian activity".²⁴ If this was true a couple of decades ago, it is more than ever true today. Nurture is the "in" word now. It has climbed the agenda, become more fashionable, more time-consuming and, dare we say it, more congregationally chic, than mission.

It would be easy to conclude that those who spend most of their time and energy, even financial resources, on structure, the nature of ministry, the social life of the congregation, maintenance committees, and the seemingly endless round of camps, conferences, retreats and workshops have really lost the plot. That might be a harsh judgment since there is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these concerns or activities. They are in fact all quite legitimate. It is simply that they take up so much time and energy and the best available personnel that there is little left to invest in the reason for the church's existence. Consequently the church becomes increasingly inward-looking and self-centred, which is the very antithesis of authentic Christian life and the church's reason for being. This unhealthy and unbiblical nexus must be corrected if we are serious about our mission responsibilities. David Watson complains impatiently of the "moribund, introverted ranks" of many churches, and observes painfully but truthfully, "we have a private dialogue with ourselves while man plunges suicidally on into absurdity and despair".²⁵

It is also necessary to address with purposeful intent the issue of function within the church. The idea that ministry is the sole prerogative of the ordained pastor simply will not do any longer. It is not a biblical view, as has been said frequently in recent years. Some local churches may have caught on, but the truth still has a long way to travel before it permeates the whole body of Christ. Ministry is the task of the entire believing community, pastor and people together. Michael Green, in one of his many perceptive and helpful books on the life and work of the church, says in *Evangelism Now and Then* that every-member involvement in the mission of the church is "the biggest difference between the New Testament church and our own". Then he adds, "It is not until church members have the enthusiasm to speak to their friends and acquaintances about Jesus that anybody will really believe that we have got good news to tell".²⁶

24 Gavin Reid, *The Gaggling of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1969), 125.

25 Watson, *Evangelism*, 136.

26 Michael Green, *Evangelism Now and Then* (London: Daybreak, 1992), 117,

Walter Douglas believes, with substantial reason, that we have “a great deal of catching-up to do” with respect to lay involvement in the mission of the church and in ministry to the waiting world. “It is not more or less organization of church structures or the refining or redefining of church polity that we need”, he says. “*What is desperately needed is the laicization of the church*” (emphasis supplied). It is a conclusion that many from across the Christian spectrum have reached as they have studied the New Testament teaching on church, mission and ministry. “Members in the local congregation must be taught that when God calls them into his church, he calls them to serve in the mission of the church”.²⁷ This message has been preached widely now for years, but it is still far from being implemented in many parts of the world. So where does responsibility lie for ensuring that the Great Commission is fulfilled? It lies, as it always has, with all who are disciples of Jesus.

Regaining the Initiative

Further direction from Jesus can be found in Luke 10, a chapter that invites scrutiny by all who are serious about the Great Commission. In appointing the seventy Jesus said, “The harvest truly is great”. There is timeless truth here, relevant to every age in which disciples are called to go out into the highways and byways, as they still are today. To Jesus, the harvest is always great. There are always those who, for whatever reason, are ready to hear the gospel and are willing to receive it. Some may have been opposed or hostile on previous occasions. But now their minds and hearts are open. The Spirit has been doing his silent work. And, of course, witness must be faithfully borne to those who are still ignorant, hostile, or apathetic, regardless of any immediate outcome, since they too might respond later.

How, then, shall we proceed? What can be said that will direct us towards a more successful fulfilment of Christ’s commission? It is impossible to answer that question in any detail, and in any case it is not the purpose of this chapter to suggest strategies or methodology. Basic attitudes and underlying principles must come first and must undergird all strategies and methods. The following five principles are critical to successful mission now as always, as we proceed into the twenty-first century. Without them any hope of true success is at best minimal.

Witnesses to Jesus

Acts 1:8 contains two further truths essential to the fulfilment of the Great Commission. Firstly, the disciples were to be “witnesses unto Me” (NKJV), although some other contemporary versions prefer “witnesses for

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27 Walter Douglas, “Vocation as Mission”, in Dybdhal, *Adventist Mission*, 111.

Me". Lenski is rightly all-inclusive: "Called to witness by me, for me, about me, yea, all about me".²⁸ Jesus was the supreme focus of the apostolic witness. He still is.

How often we have heard that, and how often we have forgotten it in our enthusiasm to witness about our church, our congregation, our distinctive beliefs, our world mission program, our institutions, even our diet. Jesus is the focal point of authentic witness, no matter how valid it is to speak of other things on the appropriate occasion. John Stott adds perceptively that we are not at liberty to communicate a Christ of our own predilection who is not recorded in Scripture, "nor to embroider or manipulate the Christ who is in Scripture, but to bear faithful witness to the one and only Christ there is . . . the authentic Jesus, the Jesus of history who is the Jesus of Scripture".²⁹ This is the "irreducible minimum of the apostolic gospel".³⁰

In his book, *I Believe in the Great Commission*, Max Warren speaks of the "recovery of nerve".³¹ He means attempting to fulfil the Great Commission in an age that is outwardly more sceptical and apathetic than any other in history. In this context Warren calls for obedience in discipleship and to Christ's command. 'Obedience' is not a popular word today. It contradicts the individualism pervading the popular culture that surrounds us, the culture to which we must bear witness and which so easily infiltrates the church. Yet obedience is non-negotiable for the true Christian, especially obedience to the commands of Jesus, if witness and mission are again to become a priority. It is, of course, the obedience of love, but obedience nonetheless – specifically obedience to the mission imperatives of Jesus.

In describing the content of authentic witness, David Watson refers to the "objective, historical events" upon which Christian faith is built, pointing out that to concentrate on the "purely subjective side of the Christian faith . . . is but one step away from confusion, deception, agnosticism or even atheism". The strength of the gospel is that it is "firmly rooted in the true, historical events of Golgotha and the empty tomb".³² Citing John Stott, Watson declares, "If the cross is not central in our thinking, it is safe to say that our faith, whatever it may be, is not the Christian faith".³³ It is what Michael Green means when he says so incisively, "Mission is Jesus-shaped".³⁴ It is

28 R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961), 32.

29 Stott, *Christian Mission*, 48.

30 John Stott, *Explaining the Lausanne Covenant*, Lausanne Occasional Paper, 3 (London: Scripture Union, 1975), 13.

31 Warren, *Great Commission*, ch. 7, "The Recovery of Nerve".

32 Watson, *Evangelism*, 68-9.

33 *Ibid.*, 71.

34 Michael Green, *Matthew for Today* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988),

witness to Jesus that is true witness. Anything other, or anything less, must be abandoned immediately and forever.

Yes, it takes nerve to witness to Jesus, deliberately and uncompromisingly, in a post-Christian, post-modern culture, but no more than it did for the first disciples in a pagan Roman or traditional Jewish culture. In spite of all perceived hazards and hostility, Jesus says to his disciples today, as he did in sending out the seventy, "I send you out as lambs among wolves" (Luke 10:3), specifically to be witnesses to him, "to all nations" and "to the end of the age". The prospect may sometimes be confronting, but it does not release us from our obligations or from his expectations.

A Persuasive Lifestyle

It is almost possible to sense the unease arising in the minds of many as they read the preceding paragraphs. All the old fears and feelings of inadequacy, even guilt, are flowing again. Let me attempt to bring some comfort. We do not need special training, an extrovert personality, facility with words, endless free time, or the latest equipment in order to fulfil Christ's command. Most of us can do it without saying anything. Jesus calls us to *be*, before he calls us to *say* or to *do*. In the Sermon on the Mount he spoke about shining lights and good works leading others to glorify God (Matt. 5:16). Light and good works are both inaudible.

In a culture in which many people have become word-resistant, we can witness simply by what we are. In fact, it is impossible to communicate the gospel effectively with words if those words are not substantiated by a corresponding lifestyle. As the relentless pressure of media exposure creates expectations of a good image, the most effective images are still real people. It is what the atheistic enemy of Christianity, Nietzsche, had in mind when he wrote so scathingly, "His disciples have to look more saved if I am to believe in the Saviour".³⁵ Michael Green puts it more positively, "If we are not thrilled with Christ and being changed by Him, we can have all the techniques in the world and get nowhere".³⁶

Few have understood this challenge better than the late Francis Schaeffer. In *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* Schaeffer spoke of the need for integrity in the profession of the Christian faith. He says we "must practice truth" as well as proclaim it. In an age like ours, he argues, we have "removed our credibility before the non-Christian, post-Christian, relativistic, sceptical, lost world" if we compromise our Christian profession by a lifestyle that is less than totally Christian.

If you think that those who have rejected the plastic culture and are sick of hypocrisy are going to be impressed when you talk about truth and at

112.

35 Cited in Watson, *Evangelism*, 104.

36 Green, *Evangelism*, 22.

the same time practice untruth, you are wrong. They will never listen. You have cut the ground from under yourself. We live in a generation that does not believe that such a thing as truth is possible, and if you practice untruth while talking about truth, the real thinkers will just say, "Garbage!"³⁷

And, we might add, not only the thinkers. The same conclusion can and will be drawn by anyone. Jon Paulien's chief concern here is that the prevailing secular culture is already producing a lifestyle within the first-world church that is barely distinguishable from that which prevails within the culture itself.³⁸

Arguing that affluent Christians are a contradiction in terms and "out of sequence" with the times Snyder claims, "We have forgotten, or rejected the values of simplicity, plainness and frugality held by our forefathers and most of the world's peoples".³⁹ He then confronts the church with "a difficult choice":

To follow the way of easy affluence that leads almost inevitably to spiritual poverty or to take seriously the demands of the gospel and become a covenant community that risks taking a counter cultural stand at every point where Christian faithfulness is at stake.⁴⁰

Whether or not we agree, the need for a transparent and consistent lifestyle is beyond question if our witness, corporate or individual, is to be more than "garbage" in the eyes of the watching world. It is a witness that all can bear from now on, even if they never say another word.

Social Responsibility

Jesus also said that believers are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. In the context of this passage (Matt. 5:13-16), Stott comments on the two sayings of Jesus known as the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, observing that the Great Commission "neither explains, nor exhausts, nor supersedes the Great Commandment". This commandment to love our neighbour is an "urgent Christian dimension". Stott refers to man as "a psycho-somatic being", pointing out that our neighbour "is neither a bodiless soul that we should love only his soul, nor a soulless body that we should care for its welfare alone", thus reminding us of our responsibility for our neighbour's "total welfare", the physical as well as the spiritual. While such interaction brings credibility to a gospel that otherwise lacks "visibility", that gospel is always defined by "simple, uncomplicated compassion".⁴¹

37 Francis Schaeffer, "The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century", in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982), 4, 33.

38 Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World* (Boise, ID: Pacific, 1993), *passim*.

39 Snyder, *Liberating the Church*, 206.

40 *Ibid.*, 194.

41 Stott, *Christian Mission*, 29-30.

For those committed to words and proclamation, the equation of compassion with communication has been a hard lesson to learn. It is much easier to talk than to be involved. Yet it is impossible to study the New Testament objectively without concluding that concern for the needs of others is the hallmark of true Christian faith. A religion which majors only in words, written or spoken, to the exclusion of actual involvement in meeting the needs of the disadvantaged is never authentic Christianity, regardless of how articulate its advocates may be. The incarnate Christ has been described as “the unwearied servant of man’s necessity”, and the work of his disciples now, as always, is “to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and comfort the suffering and the afflicted”.⁴² Social concern and involvement are of equal importance in fulfilling the Great Commission as is verbal proclamation.

This conviction led to the inclusion of a statement regarding Christian social responsibility in the Lausanne Covenant on world evangelization, a document that still shapes the thinking of many in the evangelical world.⁴³ Both social action and evangelism “are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ”.⁴⁴ Commenting on this clause in the Covenant, John Stott declares, “We must seek not only the spread of the kingdom itself, nor only to exhibit its righteousness ourselves, but also to spread its righteousness in the midst of an unrighteous world. How else can we be the salt of the earth?”⁴⁵ The question refuses to go away.

Evangelism and Growth

It hardly needs to be said that evangelism and growth are crucial to the life and mission of the church. Yet both have attracted unfavourable comment in recent times from some within the church, quite unjustifiably it may be said. In the unambiguous words of one thoughtful and convinced practitioner, “The church is in the growth business, or it will die”.⁴⁶ This forthright statement calls for serious reflection, particularly as many congregations in some parts of the world are already dying and as the church as a whole in the Western world is more or less stagnant, at best. It is our contention that evangelism, in its broadest sense and as one form of mission and witness,

42 E. G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1942), 17, 106.

43 The definition of ‘evangelical’ has changed in recent times; see David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1993) and Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism* (Nottingham: IVP, 2015).

44 Stott, “Lausanne Covenant”, clause 5, Lausanne Occasional Paper, 3, 15.

45 *Ibid.*, 17.

46 Michael Harper, *Let My People Grow* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1977), 20.

still leads to growth.

It is important to qualify the foregoing by explaining that growth includes spiritual growth and growth in maturity as well as statistical growth. All are essential to the well-being and therefore the functionality of the body of Christ. The church *must* grow spiritually *and* in numbers, or it will die. Both are critical. Membership growth there must be if congregational death, and ultimately even denominational death, is to be avoided. It is evangelism in the narrow as well as the broad sense that will bring growth, if we understand the word of God aright (Isa. 55:11). It is crucial that we rediscover our passion for evangelism, for it is both biblical and necessary.

Evangelism is suspect in some minds primarily because of its perceived emphasis on numbers. It is a difficult logic to follow given the many New Testament references to quantity (Luke 15; Acts 2:41, 47; 5:14). Using the phrase “yearning for growth”, van Engen asserts that “yearning for numerical growth is an essential mark” of the true church. It is a biblical concept, “by which the church has always expressed her nature in ‘yearning’ to incorporate more and more men and women within the bounds of God’s grace”. Seen like that, there can be no convincing argument against either growth or evangelism. In fact, where this yearning and subsequent rejoicing over the recovery of the lost are missing van Engen says, “we must ask ourselves whether something is not wrong at the very centre of the church’s life”.⁴⁷

Recovery of the evangelistic imperative begins with Jesus’ own ministry, in his delivery of the Great Commission and in his vision of the church yet to come. The various Greek words used to record these situations all carry the inherent idea of public comment or proclamation of the gospel. This is what Jesus himself did and what he required of his disciples (Luke 4:43; Mark 16:15; Matt. 4:17). The Greek word from which we derive the word “evangelism” is used in the New Testament of the verbal proclamation of the gospel. For those who regard dialogue as a preferred method for today, it is also worth noting Watson’s further comment, “Before any profitable discussion or debate can take place we need to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ”.⁴⁸

Lest there be any doubt about the nature of the evangelism here envisaged, it has been clearly defined as “The proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, with a view to persuading people to come to Him personally and so be reconciled to God”. The results of such evangelistic proclamation “include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his church and responsible service in the world”.⁴⁹ It is intentional, focussed, and insistent. Proclamation and persuasion lead to discipleship, obedience,

47 van Engen, *Missionary People*, 81-2.

48 Watson, *Evangelism*, 27, 46.

49 Lausanne Covenant, clause 4, “The Nature of Evangelism”.

church membership, service and growth. The outcomes are as assured as the process itself is necessary. We do it or, ultimately, we die.

The Holy Spirit

We have left until last what is arguably the most important single factor necessary to effective witness. It is the *sine qua non* of everything the church undertakes in the name of Jesus – the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. To do justice to this profound and indispensable theme would require a whole volume in itself. It is possible here only to underline again the essentials of what we have known, at least in theory, for decades.

The necessity of the Holy Spirit in witness begins with Jesus himself. On the evening of the resurrection day when he first met with his frightened and uncomprehending disciples, he “breathed on them” and said “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22; with Luke 24:44-48). Lenski makes the important point that this was not, as many have supposed, an “in earnest” bestowal of the gift that would come in its fullness at Pentecost, but a full and real impartation of the Holy Spirit then and there. It had a different purpose from the Pentecostal bestowal. The Spirit was here given to the disciples “for him to work in them personally”, to comprehend and internalize all that had happened in the preceding few days and to grasp what it was that Jesus now wanted them to do.⁵⁰ It is a critical distinction. Those who are to receive the power of the Spirit in witnessing must first be open to him and have their minds changed by his presence. The Spirit does his work in the disciples *before* they can do their work in the world.

The definitive reference by Jesus to the Holy Spirit in relation to the Great Commission is recorded in Acts 1:4-8. The disciples were to receive the Spirit before being witnesses to Jesus throughout the world of their day. The inference is clear enough. Without the Spirit they could not be witnesses, at least not effective witnesses, and experience tells us that there is a world of difference between witness and effective witness. The book of Acts is the record of what happened as a result of the fulfilment of this promise at Pentecost. Lenski, again, commenting on this text refers prophetically to Christ’s witnesses “speaking to the end of time in a great apostolic chorus”.⁵¹ It is all made possible, and only made possible, through the presence and operation of the Spirit.

Stott refers to the “language of human activity” in his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*. He says pointedly it “is seriously misleading” if such language is taken to mean that “mission is a human work and conversion a human achievement”. Speaking of the person yet to receive Christ and enter the kingdom Stott affirms that “only the Holy Spirit can open his eyes, enlighten his darkness, liberate him from bondage, turn him to God

⁵⁰ Lenski, *John’s Gospel*, 1373-74.

⁵¹ Lenski, *Acts*, 32.

and bring him out of death into life”.⁵² Michael Green observes that the Spirit is “the author, the controller and the energizer of Christian mission”.⁵³ Jon Paulien states the Spirit’s role is “essential to all effective outreach”, calling for sensitivity “to the leading of the Holy Spirit” in all such activities.⁵⁴

The final chapter of Philip Samaan’s book, *Christ’s Way of Reaching People*, is entitled “By His Spirit”. It is a fitting conclusion and an essential emphasis. Samaan speaks of the “pivotal relationship between the Holy Spirit and witnessing” saying, “The New Testament inextricably links the Holy Spirit with the sharing of the gospel”. We are compelled to agree. It is impossible, as Samaan together with those cited above and a host of others affirm, to witness effectively without the Spirit’s abiding presence, his guidance, and his power. So we ask again with Samaan, “How can we ever think that we can bear witness to Christ without the infilling of the Holy Spirit?”⁵⁵ It is perhaps the most pressing question for our time and our church.

Despite promises of the Spirit’s empowering presence “to the very end of the age”, witness to Jesus and his kingdom is a daunting task, particularly in cultures that for the past half century or more have appeared to reject the gospel in favour of more “enlightened” alternatives, or even alternative versions of Christ. But some claim that times may be changing, that there may be hope, and on this optimistic note we conclude this reconsideration of Jesus’ last command to his disciples.

Michael Green and Alister McGrath, two of the most informed and articulate contemporary advocates of Christian mission and of the biblical message itself, believe that a new day is dawning, “a day of renewed confidence in the truth of the Christian story”. Noting the “barrenness of materialism” and the “hunger for spirituality” evident in our day, Green sees a “massive cultural shift” beginning to take place and believes that “the dogmas of the Enlightenment, which have dominated Western thought for two centuries, are in full retreat”. “We are standing”, he declares, “at one of the turning points of human thought”. It is a “fascinating time to be alive”. In this context, McGrath asserts that apologetics and evangelism “are the key to the future of Christianity as it stands poised to enter its third millennium”.⁵⁶

While the grip of secularism and materialism remains strong in many quarters, there is evidence that these hopes may be justified. In Jesus’ view they are always justified. For him the fields are always ripe for harvest, par-

52 Stott, *Christian Mission*, 123-24.

53 Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975), 64. The entire chapter “The Spirit in Mission” is helpful.

54 Paulien, *Present Truth*, 23, 140.

55 Philip Samaan, *Christ’s Way of Reaching People* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1990), 144, 146.

56 Green and McGrath, *How Shall We Reach Them?* 7, 12.

ticularly now at the end of time (John 4:35; Matt. 13:39). We may therefore confidently declare our position. Never before has the potential harvest been so plentiful. Never before have the fish been waiting in such abundance to be gathered in. Never before have the sons and daughters of Adam in so many corners of the world been made so aware of the devastating effects of disordered and sinful human nature and the ineradicable hopelessness of the human predicament as in recent times. Each passing year brings increasing evidence.

Against this background, at the same time full of insecurity and abundant with offers of assurance, full of despair and full of hope, Jesus says, "Go ye into all the world, and make disciples". What better time, then, than now for unreserved commitment to a revitalized, refocused, Christ-centred, Spirit-inspired and thoroughly biblical proclamation of the Great Commission? We must not hesitate or prevaricate any longer. We *must* go. We must *all* go. The survival of the faith, the church, and the destiny of yet unenlightened millions depend on it.

