

## Introduction

In 1991 I (George) was standing at a university bus stop, disillusioned with life and looking for purpose or meaning. Another student approached me that day and offered me hope, pointing me toward the purpose he had found in following Jesus. I knew about Jesus from Sunday school where my sweet grandmas had taken me as a child. But I didn't know Jesus. I had yet to surrender to him in such a way as to find that he *is* the meaning of life. The friend who shared Jesus with me on that day had been compelled to share the gospel with me, not because he was a trained minister. He wasn't. Rather, he shared with me on that day out of the overflow of his own relationship with God and in obedience to Jesus's final command—the Great Commission. Just over a week later that good news would penetrate my heart and begin to shape my life as it had his. I very quickly came to understand that the gospel saves us from sin, for God, into the church, and onto his mission. And I have invested the past twenty-seven years of my life growing in that understanding and the obedience that Jesus commissioned me to.

Each of the three authors of this book has our own story of how we first encountered the good news of the gospel and then embraced the mission that is inextricably tied to it. That mission is summarized potently in Jesus's famous last words found in Matthew 28:18–20. This book is devoted to our and your deeper understanding and obedience to those words. At the time we were writing, all three of us served in varying capacities at Southeastern Seminary, where the motto is well known: “Every classroom is a Great Commission classroom.” From our college business and literature courses to our graduate counseling, biblical languages, and missions courses, each one is devoted to helping our students maximize their effectiveness in making reproducing disciples among their neighbors and the nations.

But my own journey in Great Commission obedience didn't begin in a seminary classroom. It started on the university campus, while I was a student learning to live on mission. And then it developed more while I was a public school teacher. Eventually I did end up in a seminary classroom, followed by overseas missionary service. My employment has changed through the years, as has my geographic location. But my mission has not. The moment I embraced the gospel of Jesus, I inherited the mission of Jesus! And that should be true in your life and the lives of all Christians. Our prayer is

that this book won't simply be read, but lived—that you, the reader, will embrace the mission of Jesus and continue to grow in your effectiveness wherever God sends you.

Toward that end, this book has been organized into five parts addressing various aspects of the Great Commission. Parts 1 and 2 were authored by Daniel Akin and answer general and historical questions, respectively. There you will find well-researched answers related to the audience and implications of the Great Commission as well as how we measure progress, how others have understood the mission, and several chapters devoted to “heroes” and the inspiring things that they said. Parts 3 and 4 were authored, with the exception of questions 15 and 24 (Robinson), by Ben Merkle. Part 3 zooms in like a microscope, and is devoted to exegetical questions digging deep into the precise wording of Great Commission-related Scriptures, what they say and mean, and what the implications for various understandings may be. Part 4 then pans out like a telescope, addressing the broader biblical and theological issues of the various iterations of the Great Commission in each of the Gospels and Acts and then how the mission is situated in the Bible. Part 5, authored by George Robinson, addresses issues related to the practical-missiological application of the Great Commission. If the first four parts aim to inform the head and motivate the heart, this final part aims to animate the hands toward Great Commission obedience. What we do with what we know matters.

As I write this short introduction, the weight of what is at stake is staring me in the face. In my office when I look in one direction I see a photo of a man I'll call “Rashid.” The photo was taken more than a decade ago in an Asian village. I first visited Rashid's country a few years earlier and worked with some courageous men and women who had been persecuted for their faith in Christ. One night, while I was sleeping in one of the leaders' homes, I faced serious spiritual warfare in the form of a dream wherein I was attacked for my faith. When I woke, I lay paralyzed in fear. A few days later, when I got on the flight leaving that country, I had decided I was never going back. I wouldn't have told anyone that, but I was unsettled. About six months later I was asked to come back and train a few dozen indigenous leaders, and I reluctantly agreed. Less than two weeks before my trip, one of the local leaders was killed for his faith. I faced a serious dilemma as to whether or not I should proceed with the trip as planned. The local leaders persisted and I reluctantly went. The courage and faith of those men and women in the face of persecution emboldened me! They understood what was at stake and kept sharing the gospel and making disciples in spite of it.

Fast-forward a year and I was back in that land working in an area that, to our knowledge, heretofore had never been evangelized. As we prayer-walked through the area, asking God to give us an open door for the gospel, a man who in my estimation epitomized what a terrorist would look like came out and invited us into his home. I nervously and prayerfully received his

hospitality. But I was honestly fearing that my earlier dream would come true right then and there. Rashid asked me what brought us to his village and I sheepishly replied, “I am a follower of Jesus and he sent me here.” Rashid’s eyes widened and he became very animated and loud. The lump in my throat grew even larger . . . until he shared that someone had started to share the message of Jesus with him decades earlier, and he had rejected that message and refused to listen. But recently, he went on, he had been having dreams and Jesus would come to him saying, “Follow me!” Rashid told me the dreams always ended the same—with him replying, “Jesus, I don’t know the way.” And then Jesus would say, “I will send someone to show you the way.” Wide-eyed, Rashid blurted out, “Tell me how to follow Jesus! Tell me what I must do!” For the next several hours we laid out the gospel, which both he and his wife responded to in repentance and faith. Then we started entry-level discipleship, explaining the importance of the Bible, baptism, worship, and prayer. We gave him a Bible and he said, “If Jesus said to make disciples, then I will need more of these.” As we walked away planning follow-up with him, Rashid went house to house through his village, telling his neighbors to come hear the greatest news he’d ever heard! A week later he was baptized, and a year later a missionary to that land said Rashid had won many of his neighbors to Christ and that they were studying the Bible and worshipping together in his home! Great Commission obedience, even when it’s with fear and hesitancy, can lead to stories like that.

So when I’m sitting in my office looking in one direction, I see Rashid. But when I look in the other direction, there’s a window. And outside of that window is a broken world filled with people who need the hope of the gospel—people like I was, at that bus stop nearly three decades ago. People like Rashid. People like you once were. This book is a feeble attempt to help you to go to those people with head, heart, and hands readied to make disciples who reproduce.

It is for God’s glory, our joy, and the good of the nations.



## Abbreviations

BDAG	W. Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BSAC	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
CNTC	Calvin's New Testament Commentaries
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
EDT	<i>Evangelical Dictionary of Theology</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ISBE	<i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
Louw & Nida	Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida. <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i> , 2 vols. New York: United Bible Societies, 1988.
NACSBT	NAC Studies in Bible and Theology
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIDNTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTC	New Testament Commentary
OTL	Old Testament Library
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
REDS	Reformed Exegetical Doctrinal Studies
ResQ	<i>Restoration Quarterly</i>
STR	<i>Southeastern Theological Review</i>
TDNT	Theological Dictionary of the New Testament
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentary
TrinJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament



PART 1

General Questions about  
the Great Commission





## QUESTION 1

# What Is the Great Commission?

In the last chapter of Matthew, almost all modern English translations place a subheading before Jesus’s last words to his disciples: “The Great Commission.” If one looks above Mark 16:14, the label occurs again in many English Bibles as well.<sup>1</sup> Many Christians today are familiar with the term. It appears as the theme or title of countless blogs, articles, books, conferences, and sermons. Subheadings and titles like these are helpful because they summarize what passages are teaching. This chapter will explore the meaning of the title “Great Commission,” where it originated, and where and why it appears in Scripture.

### The History of the “Great Commission”

Who coined the label “Great Commission” is not certain. Because the phrase is so common today, it is difficult to decipher the history of the title. An author or speaker may refer to someone in history as teaching about the Great Commission even if that historical person did not use the title. For example, many rightly refer to William Carey (1761–1834), the father of the modern missionary movement, as writing about the Great Commission in his work *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. Although Carey’s teaching is congruent with much of our understanding about the Great Commission today, he never used the expression in his famous mission treatise.<sup>2</sup> Another difficulty, as David Wright reveals, is that “commission” is a common enough noun and “great” is also so common

1. The English Standard Version (ESV), the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), and the New King James Version (NKJV) all place the same header in Mark 16 that occurs in Matthew 28. In the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the heading “The Disciples Commissioned” appears instead of “The Great Commission.” In the New International Version (NIV), there is no heading above the verse.
2. Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 127.

of a descriptor that the phrase “great commission” appears in a general sense long before its modern restricted use.<sup>3</sup>

Timothy Tennent says the expression seems to first appear in print in 1889 when Eugene Stock published his three-volume work, *History of the Church Mission Society*.<sup>4</sup> Robbie Castleman writes that it is possible that the Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz (1621–1688) created the label.<sup>5</sup> But, Malcom Yarnell argues that the earliest identification of Matthew 28:18–19 as the Great Commission appears in Francis Johnson’s 1595 work *A treatise of the ministry of the Church of England*.<sup>6</sup> Johnson describes the passage with adjectives, calling it the “last and great commission.”<sup>7</sup> Yarnell further argues that Benjamin Keach, a seventeenth-century particular Baptist, is the first to repeatedly develop “the idea that Matthew 28:16–20 is the Great Commission from which the Christian churches should live their lives.”<sup>8</sup> However, Johnson’s and Keach’s understanding still differ from the full modern idea of the Great Commission as a title for Matthew 28:16–20 as the missionary mandate.

Although the history of the phrase is not easy to sort, many Christians have adopted the phrase and continue to use it today. Some argue that Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), missionary to China, popularized the use of the label.<sup>9</sup> Taylor is often attributed with the now famous quote, “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.” A source that confirms

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3. David F. Wright, “The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary on Relations and Priorities,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (September 2007): 153. Wright provides a helpful survey and assessment of works that use the words “great commission” in his article.
  4. Tennent, *Invitation*, 127.
  5. Robbie F. Castleman, “The Last Word: The Great Commission: Ecclesiology,” *Themelios* 32, no. 3 (April 2007): 68. Unfortunately, Castleman does not reference what part of Welz’s work led her to this conclusion.
  6. Malcom Yarnell, “Enduring Submission to the Great Commission,” *Love Each Stone*, August 29, 2007, [http://loveeachstone.blogspot.com/2007/08/rogers-yarnell-dialogue-on-great\\_30.html](http://loveeachstone.blogspot.com/2007/08/rogers-yarnell-dialogue-on-great_30.html).
  7. Francis Johnson, *A Treatise of the Ministry of the Church of England* (1595), 32.
  8. Yarnell, “Enduring Submission to the Great Commission.” Here is Keach’s quote in full: “Sir, All that are to be baptized, are, by virtue of the great Commission of our Saviour, to be first taught and made Disciples by teaching; and take heed you add not to his Word, nor attempt to invert the Order of the Charter and gracious Grant of the King of Heaven and Earth” (Benjamin Keach, *The Rector Rectified and Corrected, or, Infant-Baptism Unlawful: Being a Sober Answer to a Late Pamphlet Entituled an Argumentative and Practical Discourse of Infant-Baptism, Published by Mr. William Burkit, Rector of Mildin in Suffolk: Wherein All His Arguments for Pedo-Baptism Are Refuted and the Necessity of Immersion, I.e. Dipping, Is Evidenced, and the People Falsly Called Anabaptists Are Cleared from Those Unjust Reproaches and Calumnies Cast Upon Them: Together with a Reply to the Athenian Gazette Added to Their 5th Volume About Infant-Baptism: With Some Remarks Upon Mr. John Flavel’s Last Book in Answer to Mr. Philip Cary* [London: John Harris, 1692], 78).
  9. Castleman, “The Last Word,” 68.

the attribution, however, does not exist.<sup>10</sup> Whether Taylor popularized the term cannot be known with certainty, given the dearth of information. But we do know that either during or shortly after Taylor's life, the term became popular. As Wright concludes "it was not until the last decades of the nineteenth century, or even perhaps the earliest years of the twentieth, that Matthew 28:18–20 came to be conventionally referred to as 'the Great Commission.'"<sup>11</sup>

### Why Matthew 28:18–20 Is the "Great Commission"

It is important to consider why Matthew 28:18–20 has this title, its full meaning, and what other passages the title fits. What has prompted writers to label it a "commission," and what is it that makes this commission so "great"?<sup>12</sup> Why is it not—as others have asked—for example, called the *Great Command*, the *Great Declaration*, or the *Great Suggestion*? There are several reasons. First, Jesus's words are not a declaration or a suggestion, because Jesus commands his disciples with the authority of the Creator and Sovereign Lord. He sends out his disciples with "all authority in heaven and on earth." His words require a response. The Greek aorist participle *poreuthentes* should not be translated with a relaxed idea ("as you go") but with an imperatival force ("Go!").<sup>13</sup> In fact, each participle in this passage (going, baptizing, and teaching) has an imperatival force.<sup>14</sup> The disciples must obey Jesus's words.

Second, Jesus's words are also more than a command. A command is an authoritative order that can be positive or negative. For example, "feed the hungry" and "do not murder" are commands, but they are not commissions. In a commission, one is sent with another's authority to fulfill a task or mission. Artists are commissioned to produce a painting, and ships are commissioned to deploy in service. The one commissioned has the power and authority to act for the one sending them. With his final words, Jesus sends out his disciples to participate in God's mission with his authority and with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is why many have correctly labeled Matthew 28:18–20 as a "commission." God, through Christ, has sent his followers to participate in his mission by making disciples of all nations.

Before asking why this commission is so great, it is important to understand that the Great Commission is only a part, albeit a crucial part, of all that

10. Mitzi J. Smith and Jayachitra Lalitha, *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 58; Wright also makes a similar point ("The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word," 156–57).

11. Wright, "The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word," 132.

12. This wording of the second question comes from Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 40.

13. See Question 16.

14. The imperatival force of "going" (Go!) is stronger than that of the other two participles ("baptizing" and "teaching"). See Question 17.

God is doing. From the entire story of the Bible, the grand redemptive story, we see that there is a larger *missio dei*, a Latin phrase meaning the “mission of God.” From the opening line of “In the beginning” to the closing “Amen,” the Bible tells the story of God’s mission to redeem humanity and creation. As Christopher Wright says, “*The whole Bible is itself a ‘missional’ phenomenon. . . . The Bible renders to us the story of God’s mission through God’s people in their engagement with God’s world for the sake of the whole of God’s creation.*”<sup>15</sup> Mission is ultimately about what God is doing, which is not limited to what man does. The Great Commission is man’s role in God’s greater work. God is working to bring all creation back to himself, but he gives a specific command within that greater work for his people to proclaim the gospel of Jesus. As Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert write, “There are certain things that God intends to do one day that we are to have no part in. . . . [T]here were also certain elements of Jesus’ mission during his first coming that were unique to him. We have no part, for example in dying for the sins of the world.”<sup>16</sup> Our role is to be a witness of God’s mission in Christ. We understand the Great Commission best then if we understand it as part of God’s mission. John Massey summarizes it well: “‘Mission’ is, therefore, God’s work in the world; the church serves as a sign and instrument for that mission.”<sup>17</sup>

If the Great Commission is only a part of God’s mission, then what makes it “great”? First, Robert Plummer answers, “Jesus commissions [the disciples] with language that draws a parallel to his own mission” (John 20:21).<sup>18</sup> The God of all creation is at work in his mission to restore the world and mankind to himself, and he allows his followers to play a part in that mission, a role that parallels the Son of God himself. The Great Commission is our Spirit-empowered work in God’s mission. Second, what makes this commission even more important, as DeYoung and Gilbert demonstrate, is its “strategic placement” at the very end of Matthew to climax all that has occurred prior, and its ability to sum up the major themes of the Gospel.<sup>19</sup> D. A. Carson agrees: “The Great Commission is not simply tacked on at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Rather, it brings to a climax one of the themes that drives through the entire book.”<sup>20</sup> The Great Commission completes Matthew’s teaching that Jesus came to save (Matt. 1:21). Third, these words are also Jesus’s final words

15. Wright, “The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word,” 22 (emphasis added).

16. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 42.

17. John Massey, “The Missionary Mandate of God’s Nature,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 102.

18. Robert L. Plummer, “The Great Commission in the New Testament,” *SBTJ* 9, no. 4 (2005): 7.

19. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?*, 43–44.

20. D. A. Carson, “Conclusion: Ongoing Imperative for World Mission,” in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, eds. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 178.

to his apostles before he leaves them. As a result, they carry extra power and importance. Last words are meant to be lasting words. Finally, Ed Stetzer also says, “At this moment the mission shifts in Jesus’ words from a centripetal mission—*up to* Jerusalem—to a centrifugal mission—go therefore *out from* this place.”<sup>21</sup> The expanded scope of worldwide evangelism is what makes this commission great.

When we place Matthew 28:18–20 in the context of God’s mission and Matthew’s structure, we can see why many have labeled it the *Great Commission*. In it, we reach the top of a mountain, literally and figuratively, seeing all that Christ has done for mankind and all that Christ will do.<sup>22</sup> We also see our glorious, life-encompassing marching orders from our Savior.

### The Great Commission or Great Commissions?

When Eugene Stock uses the title “Great Commission” in his work, he referred to all the gospel mandates rather than Matthew alone.<sup>23</sup> Matthew 28:18–20 is a crucial part of the Great Commission. But, our understanding of the “Great Commission” must broaden beyond Matthew’s final verses. Mark 13:10,<sup>24</sup> Luke 24:46–49, John 20:19–23, and Acts 1:8 each record commissions by Jesus to spread the gospel.<sup>25</sup> Although these passages differ in their specific focus, they all capture the command for Christians to spread the gospel. And all but John specifically reference bringing the gospel to the nations/world.<sup>26</sup> Timothy Tennent is right then when he says that there are actually Great Commissions (plural) in the Bible and that each adds to the collective force of the Great Commission (singular).<sup>27</sup> The benefit of expanding the title to include all of these passages is

21. Ed Stetzer, “To Our Neighbors and the Nations,” in *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged*, eds. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 125 (emphasis original).

22. Interestingly, many key events in Matthew’s Gospel take place on a mountain, including the giving of the Great Commission. The climactic temptation (4:8–11), the Sermon on the Mount (5–7), the Transformation (17:1), the Olivet Discourse (24–25), and the Great Commission (28:16–20) all occur on a mountain.

23. Tennent, *Invitation*, 127.

24. Mark 14:9 also mentions the prediction of the gospel going out into the whole world. The passage typically labeled in Mark as the Great Commission, Mark 16:15–20, is a part of the longer ending to Mark’s Gospel (Mark 16:9–20), which scholars almost unanimously agree is a latter addition to the book (R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 685–88).

25. Technically, Mark 13:10 and Luke 24:46–49 are predictions of the fulfillment of the Great Commission. Nonetheless, we should read them with the other texts as implicit commissions for the church.

26. One can interpret an implicit direction in Jesus sending us to the nations because Jesus’s followers have a parallel mission to his. John also records Jesus giving the disciples the Holy Spirit, which correlates well with the teaching in Acts 1:8 that the reception of the Spirit begins the commission to all of the world (cf. Acts 2:1–4).

27. Tennent, *Invitation*, 128.

that it allows the title to carry the unique contribution of each book, and it highlights the truth that this theme is important to all of the New Testament.

Robert Plummer argues that the Great Commission also appears implicitly in Paul's writings. Paul commands in Philippians 2:16 "to hold out the word of life";<sup>28</sup> he encourages the Thessalonians because the word was going out from them everywhere (1 Thess. 1:8); and he commands the church to imitate him, which has an evangelistic component (1 Cor. 4:16).<sup>29</sup> The Great Commission is present throughout the New Testament. It reaches its fulfillment as we move toward the *eschaton* (Rev. 5; 7). Its presence should not surprise us because God's mission is central to the story of the whole Bible. We should expect to see our role in it in multiple locations.

### Summary

The title "Great Commission" is not in the original New Testament manuscripts, but it faithfully captures the heart of Jesus's words, just like the word "Trinity" faithfully captures the Bible's understanding of God's being, character, and identity. Jesus has sent his disciples to continue his mission and to be witnesses to the great work that God is accomplishing. One day God will complete his mission and his followers will enter into God's perfect rest to enjoy him forever. Until then, we have work to do!

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Where does the Great Commission fit into the overall story of the Bible?
2. How does Jesus's commission in the New Testament differ from God's commands to Israel in the Old Testament?
3. Reread the passages this chapter gives as being a part of the Great Commission. What does each contribute?
4. How does placing the Great Commission within God's larger mission give us a proper perspective?
5. In what ways is Jesus's life on earth an example for our work in the Great Commission?

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28. Plummer acknowledges that the translation of this verse is debated ("The Great Commission in the New Testament," 8).

29. *Ibid.*

## QUESTION 2

# To Whom Was the Great Commission Given?

Whose task the Great Commission is has not always been agreed upon in church history. Some argue that Jesus commissioned only the original eleven apostles, who fulfilled the work in the first generation of the church.<sup>1</sup> Others argue that Jesus's words are still binding on every believer. This chapter will investigate upon whom Jesus' words are binding. The answer to the question "To whom is the Great Commission given?" is threefold. Jesus gave the Great Commission to the apostles, to each individual Christian, and to the church.

### Jesus Gave the Great Commission to the Apostles

That Jesus gave the Great Commission to the apostles is clear. In Matthew's account, Jesus spoke the Great Commission to the eleven disciples (Matt. 28:16). The disciples were the immediate audience of Jesus's commission, and the book of Acts records the continuing efforts of the church to complete it. In Acts 1:8, Jesus tells his apostles that they will be his witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." By the time we reach Acts 9:31, the apostles and other believers have proclaimed the gospel in Jerusalem, Galilee, and Samaria. The church continued to grow as the gospel went to the rest of the known world (Acts 13–28). By the end of Acts, the gospel had spread to modern-day Turkey, Greece, and Rome through Paul's ministry. From Rome, Paul hoped to continue to Spain (Rom. 15:24).

Now, Acts is silent with respect to the ministries of most of the apostles. It primarily highlights the spread of the gospel to the "remotest parts of the

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1. For an overview of early ideas about the Great Commission, see David F. Wright, "The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary on Relations and Priorities," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25, no. 2 (September 2007): 132–57.

earth” through the ministry of Paul and his three missionary journeys. It is not likely, however, that all the other apostles remained in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. We can be confident that they too spread the gospel abroad. Early traditions of the church even testify to the missionary efforts of the apostles reaching the known world, from Rome to India.<sup>2</sup>

### Jesus Gave the Great Commission to Every Disciple

The apostles held a unique role as pioneers of the Great Commission. Indeed, the gospel spread across the known world within the first generation of the church because of their influence and ministry. However, the Great Commission was not limited to those on the mountain in Galilee. The eleven apostles physically heard the words of Jesus, but they and the early church understood the Great Commission to extend to all who would be followers of Jesus. Again, the book of Acts testifies to this truth, recording the missionary work of Phillip (Acts 8), Barnabas (Acts 13–14), Silas (Acts 15:40), Timothy (Acts 16:3), Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2–3, 18), and Apollos (Acts 18:24–27), to note some of the more prominent personalities.

There are two primary reasons for concluding that Jesus envisioned the Great Commission continuing beyond the lifetimes of his original apostles. First, Jesus tells them that they are to make disciples, baptize them, and then teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded them. This observance to Jesus’s commands would include the command to make disciples. D. A. Carson says that Jesus does not say to his apostles, “[teach] them to obey everything I have commanded you, except for this commandment to make disciples. Keep their grubby hands off that one, since it belongs only to you, my dear apostles.”<sup>3</sup> Elsewhere he adds, “The injunction is given at least to the Eleven, but to the Eleven in their own role as disciples (28:16). Therefore, they are paradigms for *all* disciples. . . . It is binding on all Jesus’ disciples to make others what they themselves are—disciples of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus’s command was that these first disciples were to make new disciples who would repeat the

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2. See Bryan M. Litfin, *After Acts: Exploring the Lives and Legends of the Apostles* (Chicago: Moody, 2015); Davis also points out that the apocryphal book the Acts of Thomas, a third-century text, describes the apostles dividing the world amongst themselves and going to the region that God gave to them (John Jefferson Davis, “‘Teaching Them to Observe All That I Have Commanded You’: The History of the Interpretation of the ‘Great Commission’ and Implications for Marketplace Ministries,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25, no. 1 [January 1, 2001]: 69). Whether or not these traditions are true, the point is that the early church left a legacy of valuing and being committed to the Great Commission.
  3. D. A. Carson, “Ongoing Imperative for World Mission,” in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, eds. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 179.
  4. D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *Matthew & Mark*, rev. ed., EBC, eds. Tremper Longman and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 666.



discipleship process. Disciple-making of the nations was not the unique stewardship of the apostles. They were to teach others to do the same.

Second, Jesus's promise at the end of the commission extends beyond the lifetime of the apostles. Jesus says, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). This statement alone decisively proves that the Great Commission is for the whole church, for the whole period between the two advents of our Lord. The end of the age has not yet come. It is exegetically logical to conclude that Jesus's promise is still in effect and will remain so until he returns. Jesus's disciples today still possess the promise of the presence of Christ as they labor to make disciples of all nations. Christ was with his disciples in those early days as they preached the gospel, made disciples, and planted churches. And Christ's presence is with his disciples now as they continue to do the same.

Disciple-making is the call of every believer. Charles Spurgeon made it clear, "Every Christian . . . is either a missionary or an imposter."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, David Platt captures this idea well in his commentary on Matthew 28:16–20: "This is a costly command directing every Christian to go, baptize, and make disciples of all nations. . . . To be a disciple is to make disciples. Scripture knows nothing of disciples who aren't making disciples."<sup>6</sup> It is the responsibility and privilege of every Christian to participate in God's mission. It is a corporate mission in which everyone has a role. This will not look the same for every disciple of Christ. Just as Paul describes the church as one body with many members and many gifts united by one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:12–31), God has united his many and diverse people around his one mission to use their unique, Spirit-empowered gifts to complete it.

Each disciple may not fulfill every aspect of the Great Commission. Some may be more gifted in evangelism, some in teaching, and some in service to the body. In the same way, not every Christian must go to the nations. Some send, others go. But on a fundamental level, every Christian must bear witness to the gospel and make disciples. J. C. Ryle makes this point powerfully when he writes, "Let us never forget that this solemn injunction is still in full force. It is still the bounden duty of every disciple of Christ to do all he can in person, and by prayer, to make others acquainted with Jesus."<sup>7</sup>

Every individual Christian must be able to honestly answer the following questions: In what ways am I contributing toward the Great Commission? How am I, as a disciple, actively serving the church's mission? In what ways am I using my time, my gifts, my skills, and my resources to engage in Great Commission work? Everyone who is called to be Christ's disciple is also called

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5. C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 54 (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), 476.

6. David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 375.

7. J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Matthew* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 410.

to obey Christ's command to make disciples. Each Christian must bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and contribute to the Great Commission (see Question 33).

### Jesus Gave the Great Commission to the Church

The Great Commission is for all believers. However, this truth should not lead us to interpret the Great Commission too individualistically. As one pastor says, "a *primarily* individualistic application of this command is more a product of our Western culture than from a natural reading of the text."<sup>8</sup> Instead, we should understand the Great Commission as Christ's commission to his newly formed church. Earlier in Matthew, Jesus promised that he would build his church and that the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). Then, we see the church as the one sending out Paul and Barnabas on their missionary journey (Acts 13). Later, they return to the church to report their work (Acts 14:27–28). In this light, the Great Commission is Christ's final marching orders to his church. He does not send out maverick missionaries but believers intimately attached to a local church.

Mark Dever argues that the Great Commission is principally a command to make disciples and plant churches. He writes, "The Great Commission is normally fulfilled through planting and growing local churches. Churches fulfill the Great Commission through planting more churches."<sup>9</sup> Church planting is precisely what takes place in the book of Acts. The apostles and other believers go from place to place, evangelizing, making disciples, and planting churches. These churches then become the sending hubs for further mission work. The Great Commission needs a local church environment to fulfill the activities that Christ calls his disciples to do. It cannot be detached from the church. Again, Dever is helpful on this point:

So think once more of the four commands of the Great Commission: go, make disciples, baptize, and teach. Who does all this? Who sends out the going Christians to make disciples? The local church. And who names them as disciples by baptizing them, and then helps them to grow by teaching them? The local church does. The local church is the normal means God has given us to fulfill the Great Commission.<sup>10</sup>

8. Ryan King, "The Great Commission: Fulfilled by Churches and for Churches," *9Marks*, n.d., <https://www.9marks.org/article/the-great-commission-fulfilled-by-churches-and-for-churches>.

9. Mark Dever, *Understanding the Great Commission* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2016), 2.

10. *Ibid.*, 4–5.

The church is the environment in which disciples are made, baptized, and taught. The church is also the primary entity for training, equipping, and sending disciples to make new disciples and plant new churches. The Great Commission is the church's mission (see Question 34).

### **Summary**

The apostles were the original pioneers of the Great Commission. They were the first to make disciples of the nations, and they established the first churches across the known world. But, the Great Commission is Christ's commission to his church today as well. Christ's promise to be with his church, even to the end of the age, clearly and powerfully implies that this command is still in effect. This mission incorporates every disciple of Christ and requires each to contribute their gifts and resources. This is our assignment while we are on this earth. This will be the church's assignment until Christ returns.

### **REFLECTION QUESTIONS**

1. In what ways is your church currently taking part in the Great Commission at home and abroad?
2. What are some ways you and your church can be more committed to the Great Commission?
3. How are believers able to make disciples better as part of the church than as individuals alone?
4. Why is Jesus's promise "I am with you always, to the end of the age" important?
5. If every disciple of Jesus is called to fulfill the Great Commission, will every disciple participate in the same way? Why or Why not?



### QUESTION 3

## What Does the Great Commission Imply Regarding Other Religions?

Jesus teaches in the Great Commission that his followers are to make disciples of all nations. It is reasonable, however, to believe that almost every person in Jesus's day already followed a religion. Everyone already worshipped their own god or gods. Although many in the West claim to be areligious, including agnostics and atheists (belief systems that we would argue are still forms of faith), the majority of the world today is still religious.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Jesus's words provoke asking how Christians should interact with other religions. In other words, should Christians evangelize and try to make disciples of Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, Animists, or the many other world religions? This chapter will answer this question by examining four implications of the Great Commission for other religions.<sup>2</sup>

### Implication #1: Other Religions Do Not Have Leaders with Divine Authority

Almost every religion has someone whom its followers hold as the source of ultimate truth.<sup>3</sup> There is no shortage of spiritual teachers who claim to be God or speak on behalf of God. However, the Great Commission implies that

1. According to the Pew Research Center, the religiously affiliated currently make up the largest percentage of the world population, a group that will continue to grow in number because those religiously unaffiliated will shrink in percentage of the global population by 2060. "The Changing Global Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, April 5, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape>.
2. For an in-depth look at how Christians should relate to other religions, see Terry Muck and Frances Adeney, *Christianity Encountering World Religions: The Practice of Mission in the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).
3. A notable exception would be Hinduism, which does not have a single founder or god.

Jesus has sole, divine authority in spiritual matters. When he says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” he makes a sweeping claim (Matt. 28:18). Jesus claims the authority of the one who created the world.<sup>4</sup> “In heaven and on earth” is a phrase that encompasses all creation. Nothing limits Jesus’s authority. As Abraham Kuyper says, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!”<sup>5</sup>

This authority that Jesus possesses comes from God the Father (cf. John 3:35; 17:2; 20:21; Dan. 7:14).<sup>6</sup> On what basis can Jesus claim to receive such authority, when other leaders claim they too were sent by God? The early church father Jerome answers our question when he says, “Authority has been given to him who a little earlier was crucified, who was buried in a tomb, who lay there dead, who afterward was resurrected.”<sup>7</sup> As Ephesians 1:20–22 confirms, when Christ was raised from the dead, God the Father placed him “far above every rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.” When Jesus commands his disciples in the Great Commission, he does so with the authority of one who was raised from the dead.

Jesus’s resurrection-powered, all-encompassing authority implies that he has authority above other religious teachers. It is common to hear some compare Jesus with other religious teachers as if they are equal. However, he does not share authority with Buddha, Confucius, Muhammad, or any other proclaimed god or religious leader. Therefore, Christians should obey Jesus’s calling to make disciples of other nations despite what other religious leaders might say or teach. Other religious leaders may teach good ideas, give commands, or offer reward, but Jesus claims universal authority. The Great Commission compels Christians to listen to and follow him alone. His resurrection from the dead is proof that Jesus has authority over all things.

The apostles’ interaction with Jewish leaders in Acts 4 exemplifies Christ’s authority above other leaders. Acts 4:2 records that the Jewish leaders were “greatly annoyed” when Peter and John preached about Jesus and the resurrection, and they threatened them to stop speaking so the message would not spread (vv. 4:17–18). Peter and John respond that they follow another

4. The rest of the New Testament also declares Jesus’s supreme authority: every knee will bow before him (Phil. 2:9–10), he is the head over all rule and authority (Col. 2:10), he owns all things (John 3:35), he has authority over all flesh (John 17:2), and he is the Lord of lords and King of kings (Rev. 17:14).

5. Abraham Kuyper and James D. Bratt, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

6. There is a very strong connection between this claim of Jesus in the Great Commission and the Ancient of Days passages in Daniel 7.

7. Jerome and Thomas P. Scheck, *Commentary on Matthew*, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 117 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 327.

authority; saying, “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (4:19–20). Because they were commissioned by Jesus’s creation-wide authority, no other leader could stop them.

### Implication #2: Other Religions Cannot Offer Genuine Salvation

Jesus’s universal authority is clear in his commission to his disciples to preach the gospel and make more disciples from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). This mission necessarily includes evangelizing people of all other religions. It requires that anyone trusting a source of ultimate truth other than Jesus must abandon it and follow Christ. The Great Commission implies that the disciples of Jesus carry the only true message of salvation. This is clearly witnessed by the words of Jesus (John 14:6), Peter (Acts 4:12), and Paul (1 Tim. 2:5).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples that he is preparing a place for them so that they may be where he is (John 14:2–3). In response, the apostle Thomas declares, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5). Jesus’s answer to Thomas is paramount to the Christian faith. He says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Here, Jesus claims to be the exclusive path to God and eternal life. Carson rightly states that “[Jesus] does not mean for a moment to suggest that Christianity is merely one more religion amongst many. They are ineffective in bringing people to the true God. *No-one*, Jesus insists, *comes to the Father except through me*. That is the necessary stance behind all fervent evangelism.”<sup>8</sup> This point is even more clear when John states the purpose of his book. He says, “these are written so that you may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31). In other words, “Not all roads lead to possession of eternal life. Jesus is the God-appointed way.”<sup>9</sup> Peter, likewise, summarizes this truth when he addresses a Jewish council: “This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:11–12). Paul rounds out this trio of witnesses in an exhortation to pray for all people. He reminds Timothy, his young son in the ministry, in 1 Timothy 2:5, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” There are not many or several mediators. There is only one, and his name is Jesus.

8. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 491–92 (emphasis original).

9. Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1283.

If eternal life and relationship with God comes only through faith in Jesus, then any religion that does not preach salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ will not save. The Great Commission shows that other religions are ineffective ways to interpret truth and meaning in life. The Great Commission is built upon the principle of exclusive faith in Christ as God, Savior, and King as the only effective means to know God. To say it differently, if faith in Jesus Christ is not the single way to be saved, then the Great Commission is irrelevant. However, because Jesus is God and because he was raised from the dead, it is imperative for his disciples to persuade others to abandon their false religions and turn to Christ to be saved. It is the necessary and loving thing to do.

#### *Objections to Implication #2*

The claim that salvation is found exclusively in Christ arouses many objections by those who do not believe any religion should make such audacious claims. Every possible objection cannot be addressed here, but two are particularly common. First, some argue that when Christians evangelize other religions, they are engaging in a form of colonialism, paternalism, or cultural imperialism. Missionaries, they claim, wrongly impose their culture upon another's and destroy cultural differences. At the very least, the argument continues, missionaries are creating unnecessary political or military tension by claiming and spreading a foreign religion.<sup>10</sup>

It is right and necessary for Christians to acknowledge the faults of past missionaries who confused Western civilization and cultural practices with being a Christian.<sup>11</sup> It is also important to be aware that Western missionaries can create unhelpful economic and relational dependence today. However, these sad truths should be balanced with how Christian missionaries also have blessed other cultures.<sup>12</sup> In Robert Woodbury's groundbreaking study, he found that "areas where Protestants missionaries have a significant

10. See Michael W. Goheen, Cindy Kiple, and Beth Hagenberg, *Introducing Christian Mission Today: Scripture, History and Issues* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 333–34. For a more in-depth study on this topic, see Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); Andrew N. Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missionaries and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Andrew N. Porter, *The Imperial Horizons of British Protestant Missions, 1880–1914*, *Studies in the History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

11. As Borthwick writes, "Crosscultural missionaries went out to present Christ, but they often were unaware of the cultural and nationalistic biases that they carried with them" (Paul Borthwick, *Western Christians in Global Mission: What's the Role of the North American Church?* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012], 118).

12. As Lamin O. Sanneh demonstrates, through translation work, Christian missionaries have preserved and given value to indigenous languages and art forms, began vernacular renewal, and encouraged indigenous ascendancy (*Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, *American Society of Missiology* 13 [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989], 124–25).



presence in the past are on average more economically developed today, with comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations.”<sup>13</sup> Still, what is most important is that the Great Commission itself does not call for Jesus’s disciples to discard cultural differences or impose beliefs coercively.<sup>14</sup> The early church began in the Middle East, and it thrived in Asia and Africa before moving into the West. Even now, Christianity is so widespread that no single location can claim to be the center of Christianity.<sup>15</sup> As the apostles realized in the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), the beauty of the Great Commission is that it calls people of all nations and cultures to follow Christ while retaining cultural elements that do not contradict the gospel message and biblical revelation.

Second, others object to this exclusive claim by arguing that no religion has complete knowledge of God. Many argue that various religions simply perceive of the one God or gods differently. Each has a portion of the truth, while none has all the truth. Therefore, followers of various religions should be tolerant and accepting of all beliefs. There is a popular parable about blind men describing parts of an elephant that attempts to illustrate how all religions have a partial knowledge of God.<sup>16</sup> The moral of the parable is that no man can claim to have superior knowledge because he cannot see the whole elephant. His knowledge is partial. By analogy and application, each religion has limited knowledge of God and cannot claim their religion is superior to any other.

While there are many faults with these claims, it is sufficient to observe two fundamental errors. First, Christianity is not unique in its claim to universal truth or exclusive salvation. As apologist Douglas Groothuis writes, “While religions involve many elements related to morality, ritual, experience

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13. Andrea Palpant Dilley, “The World the Missionaries Made,” *Christianity Today* 58, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 39.

14. Goheen keenly observes that Islam and Christianity differ here regarding whether the religion should be forced or coerced (Goheen, Kiple, and Hagenberg, *Introducing Christian Mission Today*, 338).

15. “Global Christianity—a Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec>. See also, Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

16. As the parable goes, several blind men are feeling an elephant. One man feels its tusk, another feels its tail, another feels its leg, and still another feels its hide. The one who felt the tusk says the elephant is like a snake. The one who felt his tail describes it as a rope, the one who felt its leg says it is like a tree trunk, and the one felt its ear says it is like a fan. Although the parable seems persuasive at first, many have pointed out that the inherent fault with the parable is that someone can see the whole elephant and have full knowledge of reality.

and so on, all world religions make truth claims about ultimate reality. . . . Religious founders, whether Buddha or Jesus or Muhammad, purport to have received knowledge of objective truth—truth that all need to know in order to find spiritual liberation.”<sup>17</sup> Many religions are exclusive in some form. For example, the first pillar of Islam (the Shahadah), which all Muslims must recite states, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.” Even nonreligious people believe their ideas are universally true.

Second, all religions differ in many essential beliefs, which negates the idea that Christianity teaches the same truth as other religions. Jews claim that Jesus was only a man. Muslims believe Jesus was only a prophet. Buddhists believe he is an enlightened one. Hindus believe he is a holy man and wise teacher. Each of these views differs from the biblical presentation of Jesus as the Son of God. D. A. Carson rightly declares that it is not enough for Muslims to see Jesus as a prophet because they do not regard him as the greatest prophet; it is not enough for Hindus to consider Jesus as divine because they do not believe that only he is divine; it is not enough for Buddhists to believe Jesus is enlightened because they do not believe that salvation is found only in him; and it is not enough that Jesus was a Jew because Jews do not regard him as God.<sup>18</sup> Beyond their views about Jesus, a deeper study of the beliefs of the major world religions demonstrates that each religion differs in its fundamental worldviews. Each differs in how it describes the problem in humanity, the solution to that problem, and the truths of ultimate reality.<sup>19</sup> In sum, neither of these objections negate what the Great Commission implies and the rest of Scripture confirms: Jesus alone offers genuine salvation.

### Implication #3: Followers of Other Religions Need to Hear the Gospel of Christ

Because there is no salvation outside of Christ, Christians must proclaim the gospel to all peoples of every religion. Salvation comes through the preaching of the word (Rom. 10:9–17; 1 Cor. 1:21). Christians should be willing to leave everything to follow Christ. Examples of this implication can be seen in how the first participants in the Great Commission, the apostles, addressed other religions. In Acts 2, Peter preaches to citizens of many nations (Acts 2:8–11), telling them to turn to Christ and be saved. Likewise, Paul reasoned with the people of Athens and called them to stop following idols and believe in Jesus (Acts 17:16). The Athenians were “very religious,” but Paul preaches to them the one true God (Acts 17:23–24). To both Jews and

17. Douglas R. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 569.

18. D. A. Carson, “Conclusion: Ongoing Imperative for World Mission,” in *The Great Commission: Evangelicals and the History of World Missions*, eds. Martin I. Klauber and Scott M. Manetsch (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 180.

19. Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics*, 569–70.

Gentiles, the apostles preached the gospel in hopes that they would believe in Christ. Jesus tells his disciples to go because all people need to come.<sup>20</sup>

#### Implication #4: Other Religions Do Not Provide Infallible Books to Know the One True God

If Christ alone possesses divine authority, and if he is the only source for true salvation and eternal life, then are other religions completely devoid of truth? Can Western Christians or new Christians with a Hindu or Muslim background learn from other religious books? Many in the West, who desire to be spiritual but reject a structured religion, take a cafeteria approach by selecting various spiritual practices and adapting or appropriating what appeals to them. Others might simply use non-Christian books to help them know the God of the Bible in different or new ways. The Great Commission implies, however, that the Christian Scriptures are the only means of special revelation since it is Jesus's teaching that his disciples are to follow and observe. The Scriptures are the only inspired authority that allows us to know God personally and to know how to live as he expects. They alone are backed by the authority of Jesus and his commission to teach all that he commanded.

This implication does not mean that everything taught in Christianity is unique. The practice of fasting appears in other religions. And, we hope that every religion teaches that murder is wrong. Nor does it mean that nothing can be learned from other religions. Some ethical claims in Christianity appear in other religions.<sup>21</sup> Arthur Holmes reminds us, "All truth is God's truth wherever it be found."<sup>22</sup> There must be, as Timothy Tennent encourages, a balance between two extremes of broad condemnation and naïve acceptance.<sup>23</sup>

20. This discussion naturally causes many to ask what happens to those who do not hear the gospel message. In short, the Bible teaches that God has revealed himself via general revelation in nature (Rom. 1) and conscience (Rom. 2), and that he has revealed himself in special revelation in Christ and the Scriptures. General revelation can condemn, but it cannot save (Rom. 1:20). Only the special revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ can bring a person into a right relationship with God. To be clear, God judges no one for what they do not know. Those who die without hearing the gospel are condemned for their rejection of general revelation not special revelation. That is why we send missionaries. We must get the saving special revelation of the gospel to the nations so that they can be saved. Carly F. H. Henry is right, "The gospel is only good news if it gets there in time." For more information on this, see *ibid.*, 585–98; Keith Johnson, "Christian Theology of Religions," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 373.

21. Johnson, "Christian Theology of Religions," 370–72.

22. Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 8.

23. Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 68. Tennent provides three guidelines for using nonbiblical texts. Nonbiblical texts should be used for evangelistic outreach, as a corroborative witness to a biblical message, and any nonbiblical text should be reoriented in a new christocentric setting (*ibid.*, 71–72).

He argues that even though non-Christian books may “be true, insightful, inspirational, and even spiritually edifying, they cannot be regarded as inspired or revelatory since they lack the proper Christological and ecclesiological context.”<sup>24</sup>

### Summary

Christians are commanded to share the good news about Jesus to all the nations. They are given the mandate to urge people to repent of their sins and trust in Jesus alone, since he alone has made satisfaction for sins. Consequently, such a mandate implies that (1) other religions do not have leaders with divine authority—only Jesus has all authority under heaven and earth; (2) other religions cannot offer genuine salvation—there is salvation in no other name; (3) followers of other religions need to hear the gospel of Christ—they cannot believe in him whom they have not heard; and (4) other religions do not provide infallible books to know the one true God—we must teach them to obey all things that Jesus taught his disciples.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What does it look like for Christians to persuade others to follow Jesus while respecting cultural differences?
2. With so many religions, can Christians have confidence that what the Bible says is true?
3. How does Christianity differ from other religions?
4. Why is belief in Jesus necessary to receive salvation?
5. What are ways today in which missionaries are able to benefit other cultures like missionaries in the past?

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24. *Ibid.*, 73–74.

## QUESTION 4

# How Does the Great Commission Relate to the Great Commandment?

Loving God and participating in his mission form the backbone of Christian practice. Both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission are essential in the life of the church. These two central tenets of Jesus's teaching are inseparably linked. They complement one another. In order to understand the proper relationship between the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, we must first understand the Great Commandment in its own right. Therefore, this chapter will begin by considering the Great Commandment, including how loving God relates to loving neighbor. The second section then will consider how the Great Commandment and the Great Commission are related to one another.

### Understanding the Great Commandment

The Great Commandment commonly refers to Jesus's statement "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all of your soul and with all of your mind" (Matt. 22:37), as recorded in Matthew 22:37–40, Mark 12:29–31, and Luke 10:24–27.<sup>1</sup> Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4–5, and follows the Great Commandment with a secondary and related command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), a quote from Leviticus 19:18. To unpack the Great Commandment and its relationship to the Second Great Commandment, we will consider the motivation for loving God, and the relationship between love for God and love for neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

1. The Synoptic accounts vary, but in a complementary fashion. For a detailed outline of the differences and similarities, see Wendell Lee Willis, "Three Perspectives on the Great Commandment," *ResQ* 57, no. 3 (2015): 173–78.
2. There is some diversity as to whether the term "Great Commandment" refers solely to "love the Lord your God," or includes both "love the Lord your God" and "love your neighbor as yourself." This chapter views those commands as distinct, yet inseparably linked. Thus,

The command for God's people to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind begins with God's love for them. In this instance, God's love for his people surfaces from the covenant context of his command. By quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus places his command in the context of God's covenant with his people. Deuteronomy is introduced as a covenantal document that recounts God's acts for and requirements of his people.<sup>3</sup> According to Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, "At the heart of covenant . . . is a relationship between parties characterized by faithfulness and loyalty in love."<sup>4</sup> When God commands his people to love him he does so after having initiated the covenant with his loving faithfulness. In application to Jesus's New Testament recapitulation of the Great Commandment, Robert Stein comments, "Like all such commands, this command is not understood as a means for entering into a covenantal relationship with God but rather as a stipulation deriving from and resulting from such a covenantal relationship."<sup>5</sup> Stein encourages readers to remember that God's commands to his people begin with God's own love expressed through his covenant faithfulness. Stein further points out the theological reality that humanity's love for God is always a response to God's love for humanity. John sums up the idea when he exhorts the church, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

As God reveals his love for his people, they should rightfully respond with love for him that permeates the whole of their beings. Walter Brueggemann argues that even the use of the word "love" in Deuteronomy 6:5 "means to acknowledge the covenant Lord (covenant partner) and so to honor obligations that belong to the covenant."<sup>6</sup> The type of love expressed toward God in Deuteronomy 6:5 and by Jesus in the Gospels is a covenantal love offered to the covenant-keeping God. The proper response to God's covenant faithfulness is to love him in covenant faithfulness and with the whole of one's being. Craig Blomberg explains this type of love as "wholehearted devotion to God with every aspect of one's being, from whatever angle one chooses to consider

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the term "Great Commandment" and "First Great Commandment" refer specifically to "love the Lord your God." The term "Second Great Commandment" refers to "love your neighbor as yourself." The term "Great Commandments" refers to both of these commands.

3. Eugene H. Merrill summarizes the covenantal context in Deuteronomy 5:1–11:32, saying, "This central division of the book opens with an explanation of the need for covenant renewal and an exhortation for that people to take it seriously. . . . The nature of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel consists fundamentally of the recognition that God is one (6:4–5) and that his people, if they are to enjoy the benefits of the ancient patriarchal promises, must serve him with undivided loyalty and faithfulness" (*Deuteronomy*, NAC 4 [Nashville: B&H, 1994], 41).
4. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 54.
5. Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 561.
6. Walter Brueggemann, "The First Great Commandment," *J. Preachers* 34, no. 4 (2011): 12.

it—emotionally, volitionally, or cognitively.<sup>7</sup> Love for God is all-consuming. It springs up from deep within one's being and overflows into every channel of one's life.

Out of the overflow of love for God comes the Second Great Commandment, to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31). Textually, the Synoptic Gospels differ slightly in their accounts.<sup>8</sup> Even so, they each intimately connect love for God with love for neighbor. As Blomberg says, “Divine love issues into interpersonal love.”<sup>9</sup> David Bosch calls love of neighbor the “litmus test for love of God.”<sup>10</sup> The theme of loving one's neighbor as a result of loving God consistently appears across the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup> The apostle John wrote it plainly, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). Loving God with the whole of one's being necessarily overflows into love of one's neighbor and drives the church's participation in the Great Commission.

### The Great Commandment and the Great Commission

Love for God in response to God's love for us provides the primary motivation for the church's participation in his mission. The Great Commandment precedes and fuels the Great Commission, and the Great Commission is the natural outgrowth of the Great Commandment. They are interdependent. Participation in the Great Commission is an upward expression of the believer's love for God, and the outward overflow of that love for God to the world (the Great Commandment).

7. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 335.

8. In the Markan account, Jesus knits the command to “love the Lord your God” (Mark 12:30) and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31) by referring to them as one singular commandment in verse 31, “indicating that the first command necessarily includes this [the second] one” (Willis, “Three Perspectives on the Great Commandment,” 176). In the Matthean account, he separates the two commands completely, noting that to “love the Lord your God” (Matt. 22:37) is the “first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:38), but the “second is like it” (Matt. 22:39). In Matthew, the commands are distinct and yet the command to “love the Lord your God” is “all inclusive,” subsuming the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (ibid.). Though Matthew and Mark make the connection in slightly different ways, each of them makes plain that love of neighbor is predicated on and intimately connected to loving God with the whole of ones being.

9. Blomberg, *Matthew*, 335.

10. David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 67.

11. Darrell L. Bock explains the greater connection, saying, “The NT elsewhere connects displaying love for one's neighbor to devotion to God. Paul's greetings often link faith toward God and love for the saints (Col 1:3–5; Philem 6; 1 Thess. 1:3). . . . Other texts closely link love toward God or Jesus and love for one another (John 13:34–35; 15:9–12; 1 Peter 2:17; 1 John 4:11). To do the law means, in essence, to love. To live by the Spirit means to love and do righteousness” (*Luke*, BECNT 3 [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 1025).

God is a missional God, and to love him with the whole of one's being must include participating in his mission in the world. "Missions exists because God exists."<sup>12</sup> God himself is the driving and motivating force behind the Christian mission. The Great Commission was not created by the church. The source is in the very heart of God. At the center of the gospel is an invitation to participate in the communion of the triune God from whom the mission flows. In participating in the communion of the Trinity through union with Christ, the believer expresses love for God by joining in his work in the world. Kevin Vanhoozer says, "The mission of the church is to join in the triune mission." He continues, "The life of the church is to participate in and display that same love that the Father has for the Son, and that same obedience that the Son shows the Father."<sup>13</sup> Through loving God, participating in the communion of the Trinity, and displaying that love to the world, the church joins in God's mission.

Thus, the believer offers love back to God through active obedience. In Jesus's own words, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). J. Andrew Kirk notes, "Love is not a concept that can be understood theoretically. To be appreciated it has to be seen in action."<sup>14</sup> The church receives the love of God through his actions toward us, communicated most fully through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In response, we express our love for him through our actions, which includes making disciples of all nations. One cannot love God with the whole of his being and not actively obey his command to "Go . . . and make disciples" (Matt. 28:19). To disobey is to actively rebel against the very communion into which Christ has welcomed the church.

The love we express upward to God in obedience to the Great Commandment flows outward toward our neighbor. Thus, the Great Commandment fuels the Great Commission by motivating our love for one another. Augustine explores this idea in "Of the Morals of the Catholic Church."<sup>15</sup> For Augustine, love for God must overflow to love for neighbor, and love for neighbor must include leading one's neighbor to love God. Augustine puts it this way:

He [Jesus] says then that the second precept is, "Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself." Now you love yourself suitably

12. Keith Whitfield, "The Triune God: The God of Mission," in *Theology and Practice of Mission: God, the Church, and the Nations*, ed. Bruce Riley Ashford (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 17. G. William Schweer argues a similar point, saying, "The missionary mandate is a revelation of God's inner being" ("The Missionary Mandate of God's Nature," in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, eds. John Mark Terry, Ebbie C. Smith, and Justice Anderson [Nashville: B&H, 1998], 97).

13. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 72.

14. J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 28.

15. The term "catholic" here refers to the universal church.



when you love God better than yourself. What, then, you aim at in yourself you must aim at in your neighbor, namely, that he may love God with a perfect affection. For you do not love him as yourself, unless you try to draw him to that good which you are yourself pursuing.<sup>16</sup>

Augustine intimately links the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, almost as a chain reaction. For Augustine, a Christian who loves God with all of his heart, soul, mind, and strength will inevitably love his neighbor as himself. Since he loves himself by loving God completely, he loves his neighbor by leading him to love God too.

The natural means by which believers lead their neighbors to love God involves both proclamation of the gospel and discipleship. Troy L. Bush comments that loving one's neighbor usually means involvement in his life and context, but he concludes, "Always, though, we must preach the Gospel."<sup>17</sup> Owing largely to the missional nature of God, our love for our neighbor is most accurately expressed when we invite them into union with Christ so that they can enjoy communion with the Trinity along with us. In fact, one would be hard pressed to think of something more unloving than withholding the gospel from our neighbor, and denying them the opportunity to "glorify God and to enjoy him forever."<sup>18</sup> As a result, the church should live missionally, "being intentional and deliberate about reaching others."<sup>19</sup> Again, we see the Great Commission is the necessary outflow of the Great Commandment.

Teaching one's neighbor to love God with his whole being means believers must love their neighbors holistically. John Stott and Christopher Wright agree with Augustine that love for neighbor must certainly include evangelism and the Great Commission. In their words, "How can we possibly claim to love him [his neighbor] if we know the gospel but keep it from him?"<sup>20</sup> At the same time, they continue on saying, "Equally, however, if we truly love our neighbor we shall not stop with evangelism. Our neighbor is neither a bodyless soul that we should love only his soul, nor a soulless body that we should care for its welfare alone nor even a body-soul isolated from society."<sup>21</sup>

16. Augustine, "Of the Morals of the Catholic Church," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity*, ed. Philip Schaff (1867; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 55.

17. Troy L. Bush, "The Great Commission and the Urban Context," in *The Great Commission Resurgence: Fulfilling God's Mandate in Our Time*, eds. Charles E. Lawless, et al. (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2010), 314.

18. John Whitecross and Westminster Assembly, eds., *The Shorter Catechism Illustrated* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2003), 7.

19. Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That Is Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture* (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 19.

20. John R. W. Stott and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 29.

21. *Ibid.*

Stott and Wright's ground for this interpretation is primarily in the Johannine commission (John 20:21).<sup>22</sup> Because Jesus sends his disciples as the Father sent him, Stott and Wright conclude, "Our understanding of the church's mission must be deduced from our understanding of the Son."<sup>23</sup> As the Son came caring for people's needs, and proclaiming the kingdom, so the church must both proclaim the gospel and care for people's practical needs. When the Great Commission is fueled by the Great Commandment, the church is keenly aware of the primary mandate to make disciples who love God with their whole being. At the same time, the church must also be concerned with loving their whole person, just as the Son has loved them.<sup>24</sup>

### Summary

Clearly, the Great Commandment and the Great Commission are interdependent. Love for God directed upward naturally and joyfully overflows outward to love for neighbor. Love for neighbor must include engaging others with the gospel, leading them to love God as well. In considering the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, David Wheeler and Vernon Whaley conclude that worship expressed as love for God "is a passionate response to the heart cry of God that includes active participation in the Great Commission."<sup>25</sup> Wheeler and Whaley summarize the chain reaction expressed above. The force of God's love for humanity compels the church to respond by returning love to God, which overflows into love for neighbor. These two loves in the life of those who follow Christ drive participation in the Great Commission. Without love for God, there can be no righteous motivation for participation in his mission. Out of love for God, Christians join him in his mission in the world and love him all the more. Looking at the intersection of the Great Commandment and the Great Commission provides yet another angle through which to see that "the Christian faith . . . is intrinsically missional."<sup>26</sup>

22. They write, "The crucial form in which the Great Commission has been handed down to us (though it is the most neglected because it is the most costly) is the Johannine" (ibid., 23).

23. Ibid.

24. There are many discussions surrounding the relationship between compassion ministries and how they relate to the Great Commission. The intention in this chapter is not to resolve the precise relationship between practical, compassion ministries, and the ministry of proclamation. Rather, the intention is to acknowledge that both are necessary in some capacity, and that they must be intimately linked to one another as a result of the Great Commandments. For further reading on seeking balance, see Michael David Sills, *Changing World, Unchanging Mission: Responding to Global Challenges* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 107–26.

25. David A. Wheeler and Vernon M. Whaley, *The Great Commission to Worship: Biblical Principles for Worship-Based Evangelism* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2011), 22.

26. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 8.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How would God's command to love others be different if it was not preceded by his covenant love for us?
2. What does it mean to love God and love neighbor?
3. Are the ways your culture talks about love similar or different to how the Bible speaks about love?
4. What will happen if believers pursue the Great Commission without it being an expression of their love for God?
5. This chapter teaches that fully loving one's neighbor means caring for both their soul and their body. Which type of care are you more likely to focus on?



## QUESTION 5

# When Will the Great Commission Be Fulfilled?

Since the time Jesus gave the Great Commission almost two thousand years ago, his followers have been making disciples (albeit not consistently). The gospel has spread to every continent and almost every geographic and political nation. Millions upon millions of people have turned to follow Christ. Because such a length of time has passed and so many have professed faith, it is natural to ask when Christians can expect to finish the task of making disciples of all nations. In other words, when will the Great Commission be fulfilled? This chapter will explore whose assignment it is to fulfill the Great Commission, what it means to fulfill it, and whether the Church can calculate its progress to finishing it.

### Did the Disciples Complete the Great Commission?<sup>1</sup>

The common opinion from the early church, through the Reformation and up until the eighteenth century, was that Jesus gave the Great Commission to the apostles and that they completed the task in the first century.<sup>2</sup> This opinion remained common because interpretations of Matthew 28 revolved around theological and ecclesiastical controversies such as baptism, the Trinity, and Christ's deity.<sup>3</sup> According to this thinking, the Great Commission is a finished, not unfulfilled, task.

1. See Questions 2 and 7 for more on to whom Jesus gave the Great Commission and how the church has historically interpreted the Great Commission.
2. See the discussion in Question 7.
3. John Jefferson Davis, "Teaching Them to Observe All That I Have Commanded You: The History of the Interpretation of the 'Great Commission' and Implications for Marketplace Ministries." *Evangelical Review of Theology*, January 1, 2001; see also Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 66–67.

Many scholars, however, have correctly argued that the Great Commission is the ongoing task of the whole church, not the task of the apostles alone. For example, Robert Plummer says, “The commission to the apostles explicitly indicates that the apostles are to teach their converts to ‘obey everything’ that Jesus had commanded them—apparently including this Great Commission as well.”<sup>4</sup> Likewise, John Piper states it well about Matthew 28:20 when he says, “If the sustaining promise is expressed in terms that endure to the end of the age, we may rightly assume that the command to make disciples also endures to the end of the age.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Great Commission remains to be fulfilled.

### The Great Commission Will Be Completed by the Church

To know when the Great Commission will be fulfilled requires knowing what counts as finishing the task, *who* we are to reach, and *what* we are to do. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus describes *who* we are to reach. He commissions the apostles to make disciples “of all nations” (Greek *panta ta ethnē*). Likewise, Luke uses a variation of the same words when he writes, “the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name *to all nations*, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47, emphasis added). Some scholars understand the Greek phrase *panta ta ethnē* in a negative, restricted sense, which gives the phrase the meaning “to all the Gentiles” as opposed to the Jews.<sup>6</sup> This is a legitimate interpretation in some contexts like Matthew 25:32. However, translating *ethnē* as “Gentiles” in Matthew 28 would place the focus of Jesus’s words on reaching every Gentile individual. Aside from the unlikelihood of a commission to reach every person, evidence heavily leans toward understanding the passage as “all the nations (people groups).”<sup>7</sup> As R. T. France writes, the “emphasis falls positively on the universal scope of Jesus’ mission rather than negatively on ‘Gentiles’ as opposed to Jews.”<sup>8</sup> The task of the Great Commission then is to bring the gospel “to all nations.”

Although the English word “nations” often connotes the idea of political or geographical nations, this understanding does not fit Matthew 28. Modern labels of political and geographic nations are simply inadequate to define the word.<sup>9</sup> Tennent demonstrates that Jesus could have used several other words like kingdom (*basilea*), territory (*chōra*), or country (*agros*) to emphasize

4. Robert L. Plummer, “The Great Commission in the New Testament,” *SBTJ* 9, no. 4 (2005): 4–5.

5. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 182.

6. Douglas R. A. Hare and Daniel J. Harrington, “Make Disciples of All the Gentiles (Mt 28:19),” *CBQ* 37, no. 3 (July 1975): 359–69.

7. Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 189.

8. R. T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1114.

9. Tennent notes that before the 1970s, many mainline churches were downsizing their missionary efforts because they believed the Great Commission was a geographic challenge and that this task was completed (*Invitation*, 357).

geography.<sup>10</sup> Instead, Jesus uses the Greek word *ethnē*, which more properly refers to “peoples” or “people groups” distinguished by cultural, ethnic, and linguistics differences. Therefore, one should understand the task of the Great Commission as making disciples of all peoples (see Question 15).

In the same passages, Jesus tells us *what* we are to do: make disciples, baptize, and teach others to obey Jesus’s commands. Fulfilling the Great Commission then is more than evangelism. As Bruce Ashford summarizes, “Our Mission is to teach people the saving words of God and to baptize them into local communities of believers—churches!—that will equip them to bring the whole of their lives into line with God’s intentions for them.”<sup>11</sup> To fulfill the Great Commission is to make disciples among all peoples who follow Jesus with their whole life.

### Future Fulfillment of the Great Commission

If the church’s task is to make disciples of all peoples who follow Jesus with their whole life, when will Christians complete it? Before delving into specifics, there is some broad agreement about if and when the task of Great Commission will be completed. First, because Jesus sends with “all authority in heaven and on earth,” it ensures the task can and will be completed. As David Mathis writes, “Christ Jesus now rules the whole universe (our little globe included) with the very sovereignty of God, ensuring the success of his global mission.”<sup>12</sup> The apostle John confirms the surety of its completion when he affirms that God will have people from every tribe, language, people, and nation worship him in his eternal kingdom (Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 14:6; 15:4). One day, God will reverse the spreading out of the languages at the tower of Babel by uniting all ethnicities and languages around the salvation of Christ.<sup>13</sup> John’s vision also confirms that the Great Commission will be fulfilled when Christ returns. At the end of time, God will have made a diverse people, one from all peoples of the world. Until then, Christians can know that the task is still unfinished.

### Can We Calculate Our Progress in the Great Commission?

That the Great Commission will be fulfilled when Christ returns is certain. The next question one may ask is whether Christians can calculate their progress. Can Christians use Jesus’s reference to “all nations” in Matthew 28:19 and his promise in Matthew 24:14 (“And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations [*panta ta ethnē*], and then the end will come”) to calculate how much work is left to do?

10. *Ibid.*, 358.

11. Daniel L. Akin and Bruce Riley Ashford, *I Am Going* (Nashville: B&H, 2016), 15.

12. John Piper and David Mathis, eds., *Finish the Mission: Bringing the Gospel to the Unreached and Unengaged* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 13.

13. J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 115, 129, 165.

There are massive complexities regarding how to interpret Matthew 24:14 and the rest of the chapter.<sup>14</sup> Setting these complexities aside, could one still calculate the Great Commission's progress if Matthew 24:14 is a prediction of God's people fulfilling it? One might be tempted to answer yes given the numerous occasions where numbers on the world's people groups are connected to talk about the Great Commission. If "all the nations" means all peoples, then research on people groups could be a measuring device for our progress.<sup>15</sup> By numbering how many people groups exist in the world and assessing how many are still unreached, one could better determine the progress toward fulfilling the Great Commission. The current number of people groups listed in the world varies between 11,774<sup>16</sup> and 16,962,<sup>17</sup> depending upon what factors (country boundaries, language, ethnicity, etc.) one uses to count. Out of these peoples, the number of unreached peoples—people groups that contain less than two percent evangelical Christians—is approximately seven thousand.<sup>18</sup> Is reaching these unreached people groups the last barrier to finishing the mission?

There are too many difficulties with applying the people-groups figures as a progress meter for the Great Commission. First, the number of people groups changes regularly, which prevents it from being a reliable measurement.<sup>19</sup> Second, as Piper writes, God probably did not intend our precise definition of people groups. He states, "The point of Matthew 24:14 . . . is

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14. Matthew 24 is one the most hotly debated chapters in the whole Gospel. Scholars differ over whether Jesus is speaking about events in the past, the future, or both the past and future. Some argue that all or most of the events that Jesus describes occurred in the first century and climax with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70; some divide the chapter between the past historical destruction (24:1–35) and future coming of Jesus (24:36–25:46); some argue that the events will primarily or solely occur in the future when Jesus returns; and still others believe that Jesus describes both the destruction of Jerusalem and his future return (David L. Turner, *Matthew*, BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 566–67). One can also understand Jesus's reference to "all nations" in Matthew 28:20 and 24:14 as general terminology about the expansion of God's kingdom rather than as literal criteria for mission work. From this perspective, Jesus is speaking about the universal scope of the disciple's task (France, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, 1114). See also the discussion on Matthew 24 in Question 28.
  15. A people group is "the largest group within which the gospel can spread as a church planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance" (Tennent, *Invitation*, 360). Many mission organizations like the International Mission Board use people group information to aid their efforts.
  16. <https://www.imb.org/research/people-groups>.
  17. <https://joshuaproject.net>.
  18. *Global Status of Evangelical Christianity: January 2018* (International Mission Board, January 2018), 3, [http://grd.imb.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/gsec-files/2018-01\\_GSEC\\_Overview.pdf](http://grd.imb.org/wp-content/uploads/documents/gsec-files/2018-01_GSEC_Overview.pdf).
  19. From the time of Timothy Tennent's writing of *Invitation to World Missions* in 2010, the Joshua Project's number of people groups increased from 16,304 to 16,962, and the IMB's number increased from 11,571 to 11,744.



not that we should reach all the nations as we understand them and then stop. The point rather is that as long as the Lord has not returned, there must be people groups to reach, and we should keep on reaching them.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the Bible does not say whether “all nations” means all peoples that have existed in history or those at a specific point in history. Neither does it tell us what counts as having evangelized or reached the nations. One must remember that the marker of a reached people group (2 percent evangelical Christian) is a sociological, not a biblical, guide. Finally, Jesus himself says in Matthew 24:36, “concerning that day [the day of his return] and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” We would do well to take Jesus’s statement seriously as we pursue the fulfilling of the Great Commission.

Research on people groups is crucial for missions, but it cannot function as a countdown for Christ’s return. Neither does Jesus intend for Christians to try to calculate it. Rather, the focus of the Great Commission is that Jesus sends out believers to those peoples that are outside of Jerusalem and Judea in worldwide evangelism and disciple-making. As Jeffrey Brawner writes, “The job of the church is not to ‘finish the task’ in mission. Christ will finish the task. Instead, the church’s purpose is to strive to reach the current generation for Christ and lay the foundation for other generations to know him as well.”<sup>21</sup>

Should then we cease to use the people group models in our mission strategy? Not at all! They are a helpful tool in many ways. They help the church to know who still needs to hear the gospel so that Christians can “preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named” (Rom. 15:20). They reveal the barriers (economic, social, political, religious, etc.) that prevent the gospel from spreading. And, they help the church to focus its efforts on places that have the most need.

Nevertheless, simply “reaching” people with the good news of the gospel is not the fulfillment of the Great Commission. The Great Commission is more comprehensive in scope and involves not only evangelism, but discipleship, healthy church formation, and local ownership of the missionary task.

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20. Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 212. See also Ralph D. Winter and Bruce A. Koch, “Finishing the Task: The Unreached Peoples Challenge,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, eds. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4th ed. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 533, “Who are these peoples? Jesus did not provide a list of the peoples. He did not define the idea of peoples with precise detail. What matters most is not that the peoples can be definitively identified and *counted*, but that God has given us a task that can be *completed*.” None of these authors make Christ’s return imminent upon reaching all people groups either.

21. Jeffrey Brawner, “Finishing the Task: A Balanced Approach,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, rev. ed., ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 573.

Evangelism is important and urgent, but maturing disciples (teaching and observing), forming healthy churches, and training pastors and leaders are all a part of the Great Commission. Our goal is not to figure out when the task will be finished. Our goal is to be faithful to spread the gospel and make disciples. George Ladd wisely says,

Someone else will say, “How are we to know when the mission is completed? How close are we to the accomplishment of the task? Which countries have been evangelized and which have not? How close are we to the end? Does this not lead to date-setting?”

I answer, I do not know. God alone knows the definition of terms. I cannot precisely define who “all the nations” are. . . . He alone . . . will know when that objective has been accomplished. But I do not need to know. I only know one thing: Christ has not yet returned; therefore the task is not yet done. When it is done, Christ will come. Our responsibility is not to insist on defining the terms of our task; our responsibility is to complete it. So as long as Christ does not return, our work is undone. Let us get busy and complete our mission.<sup>22</sup>

### Summary

Our Great Commission task is to make sure everyone has an opportunity to hear the gospel, knowing that Jesus’s resurrection confirms that the end result of all nations worshiping God is sure. We should long for all peoples to know Jesus and to see our work on earth complete. And, we should use our life as best as we can to pursue that end. However, God is in charge of his mission and he alone knows exactly when it will be fulfilled. He began it, and he will finish it. We can praise God that he would use us in it.

### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Why should Christians not concern themselves with determining when the Great Commission will be completed?
2. Does the Great Commission feel like an overwhelming task to you? What in Scripture can encourage you that it will be completed?

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22. George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 136–37.

3. Can Christians who do not move overseas still participate in the Great Commission? How?
4. How does it make you feel that God has entrusted his mission to the church?
5. If the Great Commission includes making disciples, how does this change how we approach cross-cultural missions?