

The Great Commission of the Church

On this Trinity Sunday, let's consider this gospel text, Jesus' Great Commission to the church, which gives us the trinitarian formula we repeat at every baptism and ordination.

I'll read Matthew 28:16-20:

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

One New Testament scholar has written that these five short verses "are among the most important to establish the ongoing agenda of the church throughout the ages." And one of the key words in the Great Commission is the modifier "all." I cannot resist this word as an indication for an outline for any message on this important passage. Formerly, I've heard many messages on this text preached in missionary commissioning services, and have used it to challenge congregations to be more "missions minded" in their support of overseas mission work. But this Great Commission has something to say to us today, even though we're a small group of Christ followers. We've been given the same authority, responsibility and empowerment for our part, our mission, you might say, in the Great Commission.

"Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority (*exousia*) in heaven and earth has been given to me'" (v. 18). We here at Dale Heights have ***all authority***.

Jesus had finished the work on earth he had come to do. He provided for our salvation through his suffering and death on the cross. He was now risen and preparing to ascend to heaven as exalted King of kings and Lord of lords. But his work of Kingdom expansion on earth was just beginning. With his authority as exalted, risen Lord and Savior, he announces his lordship over his followers and gives his marching orders to his worshipers.

Of this crowd of perhaps 500 or more (1Cor. 15:6), many, perhaps most, worshiped him. They recognized his worth and worshiped in adoring humility. The word for worship here is the word that means "to prostrate oneself before." We're never fully prepared for service to the Lord until we have met him and come to adore and revere him. Worship centers our hearts on Christ and makes him central in our lives. In worship we're reminded, not only of Jesus' right to command our obedience, but also of our total indebtedness to his grace. Our hearts are once again stirred with grateful love.

But our text tells us that Jesus came to announce his authority, not only over worshipers but also over doubters. We don't know why some in the crowd doubted. Even the great sign of Jesus' bodily resurrection didn't eliminate doubt, which shows that faith is a work of grace and is not of sight and human reasoning. This word in verse 17 for doubt (*distazo*) refers more to hesitation than to settled unbelief. It was

perhaps a temporary suspension when they had a mind to believe and one to disbelieve. Maybe a risen Lord was too good to be true. And who among us hasn't had doubts? And even after times of great assurance, doubts can suddenly resurface.

Someone has said we're either a missionary or a mission field. I've discovered that God's work in and through my life doesn't depend on the strength of my faith. There've been times in my life and ministry when I've struggled with doubts about God's love and goodness when I've experienced difficulty and disappointment. But God has continued to use me in his work. God's people, his worshipers, encourage me to move from doubt to worship and joyful service. The authority of God has in some ways rested on me more during times of adversity than in times of relative ease. The authority of Christ doesn't mean we live "on top of the world" or have the power to manipulate and control others. It doesn't mean we have to win every argument. In fact, we don't have to argue at all. It's simply the authority of an authentic life of loving Jesus and serving others. In our humble dependence on God, his power and authority rest upon us.

As a child of God, however spiritual or unspiritual you think or feel yourself to be, you have *his authority* to represent him to others.

With all authority we go to ***all nations*** as an act of obedience. The word for nations is "ethne," and means "peoples, cultures, or nations." And as a small church we are able to participate in world-wide missions through our financial and prayer participation in mission causes. But also, all of us have an "ethne" where God has placed us. It is an identifiable group of people who have something in common with us. Obviously, you share the same language, but also you share common interests. Included in your "nation" are members of your family, the priority in your mission field. God has given you other "ethne" in your various arenas of influence: your school, work place, neighborhood and places of recreation. Here are people with whom you have regular contact.

As C.S. Lewis reminds us, "There are no *ordinary* people." We need to realize that "the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long, we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or another of these destinations" (*The Weight of Glory*).

Even as we go forth in our mundane routines of life there is to be a sense of purpose, knowing God's in control even of our normal "traffic patterns" and our casual conversations and serendipitous encounters. Worship will send us forth as missional Christians, not just as supporters of missionaries. There's a banner you can read as you depart this building, which says, "When worship ends, the service begins."

Effective disciple-making is going to have to be done through one-on-one relationships. And in our increasingly secular culture, relationships are perhaps the only way of reaching the unconverted and unchurched, who aren't likely to visit our worship services.

Palmer Ofuoku, although not a Christian, was placed in a mission school in Nigeria because his parents knew he would receive a good education there. He attended the school for years, yet remained an adherent of a traditional African religion. One year a new missionary came to the school who began to develop close relationships with the students, including Palmer, and eventually led this young Nigerian to Christ. Palmer Ofuoku explained the missionary's influence, saying "He built a bridge of friendship to me, and Jesus walked across." (Harbour).

As missional Christians, we need to build some friendship bridges close to home. I think of this large apartment building under construction next door to us. There's a sidewalk running through our property to the front of this building. Perhaps we should begin thinking and praying about how it can be a "bridge of friendship" for people that would be drawn to the love of Christ demonstrated in our lives. Possibly God will lead us to host these new residents as our guests for an open house, showing our unique gift of hospitality.

And we live our everyday lives with the freedom and joy of the Spirit, and under the authority of Christ, who's always at work and inviting us to join him. When we join him, we soon realize he's gone ahead of us, preparing the way to connect our lives with others, even in serendipitous encounters and unexpected ways.

We have all authority to go to all places to **teach all things**. The main verb in the commission is "*make disciples, teaching... to obey everything (lit, all things) I have commanded you*" (20). The Gospel of Matthew became a handbook on discipleship in the early church for the succeeding generations. We're to teach others by word and example to obey the Lord Jesus. We have the opportunity to teach through Bible reading and preaching, and also through special times of weekday studies. But we teach more by how we live than by what we say or instruct by words.

A disciple is a learner enlisted to be like his teacher. Jesus said, "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher" (Luke 6:40). The Great Commission is based on the assumption we're becoming more like Jesus, and thus requires that we reproduce ourselves in the lives of others (a humbling thought for me!).

Darkly negative examples of disciples are those being made by terrorist organizations, literally throughout the world. They're following and becoming like their teachers, bent on creating terror in order to disrupt social and government stability and carry out their agendas of hatred.

The *Great Commission* mandates us to go and make disciples who'll become like us in the way we're like the Master Teacher, Jesus. And, the first step is to seek to connect them with the Body of Christ, the church. We're to call the not-yet-converted to a relationship with Jesus as Lord, and to obedience that's marked by baptism in the name of the Trinity (19).

There is, in authentic disciple-making, instruction in the Word, teaching Jesus and the Scriptures. We're to make worshipers out of doubters and not-yet-believers. Our evangelism must be holistic. We're commanded to lead people toward spiritual

maturity, not just to spew out information, but to oversee the transformation of the character of those we love in the spirit of Christ.

This means we stay with the new convert. We seek to help new converts grow until they become disciple-makers themselves. Then we can grow by multiplication. (Many if not most of you here this morning could mentor a new convert, simply meeting weekly and going through the Gospel of Matthew, which is a great “manual for discipleship”).

The work of the Great Commission is done with all authority, in all places, teaching all things, and **with him who is with us *always***. Jesus promises, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,” “forever” (20). As one has said, Christ accomplished his work in his incarnation and gives *us* his presence so that we may accomplish our work (Nixon). Jesus is passing the torch to his disciples. He promises the Holy Spirit, who came upon them in full measure and permanently on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Now he resides in every follower of Jesus (Romans 8:9; Ephesians 4:30), even when we’re oblivious to him.

The most important asset we have is the presence of God. Without him, Jesus said, we can do nothing (John 15:5), i.e. nothing of kingdom value. Prayer is not our offering God our “grocery list,” nor is it overcoming God’s reluctance to join in our pre-determined endeavors. Prayer is the language of dependence on God, and the expression of our heartfelt need for him. Sometimes the most eloquent prayer is one word: “Help!” Doing the Great Commission is God’s work, and prayer is asking him to work through us. I know I need him desperately, and I’m glad Jesus promises he’ll be with me. Even when I’m not feeling spiritual and don’t think I have anything to offer others, I can nevertheless be sure of his presence. We can rest assured of his presence because he knows more than we do how we need him in order to join in his work.

My church tradition was caught up in a “can do” spirit and a mindset of pragmatism. We used methods of personal evangelism that resembled secular sales techniques and grew church attendance on the best marketing methods that could help any business grow. Superficial church growth and evangelism produces artificial Christians. But kingdom of God work is to be done God’s way—through authentic Jesus followers.

Our text tells us that some worshiped Jesus and some doubted. I think we can safely assume that some of these doubters didn’t remain in a state of reluctance and hesitation, but, like Thomas, joined the other worshipers in living and doing the Great Commission. Those who doubt can eventually move from being a mission field to a missionary. But God will use us even when we lapse back into a state of doubt.

I know I’ve discovered God’s grace at work especially after I’ve become, in the words of Henri Nouwen, a “wounded healer.” There are times when God has used me when I wasn’t feeling particularly spiritual. I’ve preached sermons that seem to fall flat (maybe like this one!) and were delivered from an empty heart, dry, empty words which I later discovered were the very words someone needed desperately to hear. So, I’ve been a missionary while also being a mission field, a doubter and a worshiper! I’m often reminded it’s all of grace anyway.

Soon after returning from Brussels and making my new home here in Madison, I developed a friendship, through my membership in a fitness center near my home. Of all things, he's a professional poker player and owner of a sports bar. Odd buddy for a preacher. And my next-door neighbors in our condo community have been elderly guys, about my age, who are caring for their wives, both of whom suffer from Alzheimer-induced dementia. We're showing the love of Christ, and I hope to be faithful in sharing the message of God's love with them. I'm as much a missionary here as when I was on the mission field of Western Europe.

All of us need to ask about the part God has for us. His calling is for us to join him in what he is doing in the Great Commission. As you go into your world tomorrow and maybe today, worshiping or even doubting, God will help you build a bridge of friendship to someone for Jesus to walk over.

Remember, because Christ is in you, you have **all authority** for living, serving and witnessing in **all places**, able to share **all things** that God has made known to you, knowing he's with you and will be with you, **all the way**, even into eternity.