

Editorial: Reflections on the Great Commission

Stephen J. Wellum

EVERYONE ADMITS THAT our Lord Jesus' command before his ascension to go into all the world and make disciples of all the nations (Matt 28:18-20) is programmatic for the church. It has been rightly labeled the "Great Commission" for Christ's church. If we are to be faithful and obedient disciples of our Lord we cannot neglect

what the Lord of the church has commanded us to do. With that in mind, I offer three reflections on the Great Commission which hopefully will set the stage for this issue of *SBJT*, which is devoted to this very important subject and the larger theme of global Christianity.

First, at the most basic level, the Great Commission is foundational to the church's purpose. Often the church's purpose is described in a threefold way. Our

first and primary purpose is to glorify God and to worship him in every area of life. Worship, it must quickly be stated, is *not* merely what we do

on Sunday or how the "worship team" leads us in singing and praise. Rather, "worship" is a comprehensive category in Scripture that describes our engagement with our covenant God through faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. Such faith necessarily expresses itself in daily obedience and service to God in every sphere of life, including our gathering as the people of God. Second, the church's purpose is to nurture and edify God's people in order to build them up into maturity in the faith (Col 1:28-29; Eph 4:11-16). Another way of stating it: the church is to make disciples by teaching them the Scriptures (cf. 1 Tim 4:6, 11, 13; 5:17; 2 Tim 2:1-2, 14-15; 4:1-5; Tit 1:9) which equips "the saints for works of service" (Eph 4:13). Third, the church is to take the gospel to the nations as we live our lives in this world and await our Lord's return (Matt 28:18-20). When relating the Great Commission to the purposes of the church, it specifically emphasizes the last two purposes even though edification and witness can never be divorced from our worship of God. And it also reminds us that unless our churches are

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living out all three purposes we are sadly *not* fulfilling our calling, or our *raison d'être* (reason for being) as God's people. The health and vitality of our local churches must be evaluated by this Great Commission standard alone, which is a sobering thought indeed.

Second, it is important to place the Great Commission in the storyline of Scripture and the overall plan and *missio Dei* (mission of God). Too often we isolate our Lord's command from God's mission and what he is incredibly doing in the world through the church. In recent years, the person who has reminded us of this important point is Christopher Wright. In his important work, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (InterVarsity Press, 2006), Wright argues that the whole 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 God's purpose for the whole of creation. Mission, including the Great Commission, is *not* just one of a list of things that the Bible talks about. Mission is what the Bible is about. God is at work in this world and human history as Creator, Redeemer, and Judge. He has a plan, goal, and purpose for this world which ultimately is for the glory of his own name and the good of his people. And it is precisely because God has a mission and plan that we, as his image-bearers and redeemed people, have a mission. The Great Commission, then, is not an isolated piece from this overall plan; rather, it is part and parcel of that plan as we live our lives for God's glory and take the gospel to the nations. When viewed in this way, we are reminded both of our incredible privilege to be Great Commission people as well as the awesome responsibility our great God has entrusted to the church.

Third, the Great Commission is only possible because of the triumphant work of God's Son, Jesus the Lord. In the New Testament, the Lordship of Christ is developed along two *complementary* paths. By virtue of who the Son is as the eternal Son and second person of the Trinity, he is Lord (see John 1:1-3; Col 1:15-17; Phil 2:6; Heb 1:1-3). Yet, probably the more predominant

emphasis in the New Testament, is that the eternal Son *becomes* Lord by virtue of what he does, namely his taking upon our human nature and his cross work for us including his life, death, and resurrection (Rom 1:3-4; Phil 2:7-11). In other words, it is due to his work as God the Son *incarnate* that he acts as our representative and substitute and wins for us our salvation. Without his entire work for us there would be no salvation and no Great Commission. It is this latter emphasis which Matthew 28:18-20 stresses. By virtue of his resurrection, our Lord announces that "all authority has been given to him" so that as the victorious and triumphant Lord he sends his people out into the world. It is under the marching orders of King Jesus that we, as his ambassadors, take the gospel to the nations. Once again, this reminds us that there is no higher calling imaginable than to serve as his ambassadors announcing his triumphant work and kingdom to the nations.

In this issue of *SBJT*, our goal is to reflect on the Great Commission. We want to wrestle with how it is tied to God's overall mission as well as ask how we are doing as the church in taking the gospel to the nations. In addition, we want to wrestle with various challenges we face in our global context in order to fulfill our Lord's command. It is my prayer that this issue will remind us anew of our great privilege and responsibility to be God's people and to be part of his larger mission and plan for this world.