



Thinking Clearly About The Great Commission

by Rose Dowsett

Preface

I lay in a downtown Manila hospital, critically ill, and drifting in and out of consciousness. The doctor caring for me expected me to die, and had told me so. A devout Christian man, his great concern was that I should have made my peace with God – and indeed with anybody else with whom I might have unsettled business. He prayed beside my bed with grace and compassion. My unconsciousness deepened.

People came and went, speaking to each other about me, wondering how long I would live. I could not respond to them, or even indicate how much I heard. But deep down inside my being, another conversation was going on, between myself and God. 'Lord, this is such an expensive way to have a funeral! If I was going to die, why didn't you just let it happen back home six months ago?' 'My child, will you trust me?' came the gentle reply. 'Alright, Lord. I do trust you. But, did I get it all wrong, coming here to be a missionary?' 'No, child, you didn't get it wrong. But, tell me: do you love me even more than you love what you think you can do for me?' A long pause. 'Lord, I truly want to love you above all else. And I truly want to trust you absolutely.'

A couple of weeks later, to everyone's surprise, including my own, I emerged from coma into the long, hard and erratic process of recovery. It was to be many months before I could even begin to cope with everyday life. To this day, I carry in my body the consequences of such severe illness.

Yet, profound though the impact on my body was, the impact in other ways was deeper still. I came to the conviction, steadily reinforced through my reading of Scripture down through the years, that however important the task, more important still is the living God from whom the task flows. I discovered in new ways how crucial, and how beautiful, it is for passion for the Lord and passion for his truth to come together. I realised how much I had yet to learn, about trusting God in circumstances I would not have chosen, and in many other ways as well. In my acute weakness – I was very ill in a strange country to which I had only recently come, newly married to a husband who was himself convalescent, unable to speak the local languages – it was those I had 'come to help' who cared for me, pouring out love and every kind of practical service on this foreigner in their midst. It transformed and defined my relationships with Filipino colleagues, and changed my understanding of missionary service in many significant ways.

And, yes, it made me think much more deeply about the Great Commission. I had come to Christian faith at the age of seventeen through reading the New Testament from cover to cover three times in three weeks. I had set out to disprove it, and instead found myself gripped by the person at the heart of it, the Lord Jesus Christ. The institutional church, it had seemed to me, deserved only scorn: was it not sickeningly hypocritical, over and over again the cause of war and violence and oppression? Yet here in the pages of Scripture, the calling of God's people to stand at the frontier between faith and unbelief and to live out dynamically the love and grace of God leapt out at me. How could anyone who claimed to take the Christian message seriously not then devote his or her life to urging it upon others? I could not divorce discipleship from mission. I had been born into a worldwide family, with global privileges but also global responsibilities. I could not have the one without the other. So, from the very start of my Christian life, the Great Commission was central. Within weeks, by a strange series of events, I was sure that one day the Lord would take me to Asia as a missionary. The task might be enormous, but it was surely inescapable.

Nothing that happened during the next few years, including family tragedy, family opposition, and the options opened up after university, shook that conviction, though it was tested to the limit. On the contrary, I became increasingly certain that God was asking me to invest my life in world mission. So,

it was no surprise to find myself in Asia, arriving on my twenty-sixth birthday in Singapore, en route to the Philippines, where my fiancée was already working. But it was a surprise, a few brief months later, to be apparently dying, with the task that I thought I was about to begin instead already completed, at least as far as I was concerned.

And then, that deep-down conversation with the Lord, as vivid, as immediate, as indelible as any exchange could ever be. That haunting, penetrating question: 'Tell me: do you love me even more than you love what you think you can do for me?'

And so, in the more than thirty years since then, my life, and that of my husband, has indeed been invested in world mission. It has often worked out far differently from what we could ever have imagined, and we were only able to live in Asia for a brief though life-changing eight years. We still believe, passionately, that the whole world needs to hear the good news about Jesus Christ. But I also believe that first of all our focus needs to be on the one who gives the task. The Great Commission is then rooted not primarily in a few verses, a few commands, at the ends of the gospels, but rather in the glorious character of God himself, utterly consistent through time and eternity. The focus is not primarily on what we do, but on who God is.

It is my prayer that this will be a liberating truth to those who read this book, and that as we try to think more clearly about the Great Commission we shall be inspired both to love the Lord more dearly and to engage in mission with glad and open hearts

Chapter 1

The last words of the risen Lord Jesus before his ascension into heaven must have shaken his disciples to the core. Two thousand years later, if we take them seriously, they still both shock us and thrill us. In this chapter, we begin to explore their meaning.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:5-11

If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. John 8:31

God has appointed Christ to be the heir of the world in his kingdom of grace, and to possess and reign over all nations, through the propagation of his gospel, and the power of his Spirit communicating the blessing of it. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1757)

To be a Christian is to be a member of a missionary community and to become a participant in the activity of a missionary God. Daniel Niles (1908-1970)

Discipleship must always be discipleship-in-movement-to-the-world. The disciple who will not lay down his life for the world and for the gospel of reconciliation is not worthy of being a follower of Jesus Christ. Charles Van Engen

When I first became a Christian, I was very self-centred about it. It was great to feel forgiven and loved, to have someone to turn to and ask for things. Looking back, I don't think I really had much of a clue. I suppose it's a bit like being a newborn baby: something momentous has happened, but you've still got everything to learn. But gradually the penny dropped. As I got to know God better, and realised more and more what an amazing Being he is, I wanted to love him for himself, not just for

what I could get out of him. And then, of course, I found I wanted to tell other people about him, and see them put their whole lives in his hands, where they belong. That's what being a disciple is all about, isn't it? A Scottish student

A Never-To-Be-Forgotten Day

Imagine the scene. Eleven men had gathered on an unnamed mountainside, in the north of Palestine. They had trudged the best part of a hundred miles from Jerusalem. They were emotionally exhausted. Who wouldn't be, after all they had been through in a few short weeks? They had experienced the heights of giddy hope and the depths of crushing despair, not once but over and over again. They had lived for weeks in fear of their lives. They had endured the spine-tingling shock of having their best friend and inspirational leader publicly executed, and then eerily, unbelievably, break free from a heavily guarded rock tomb and appear among them on several distinct occasions. They had invested three years of their lives, at great cost, in a dream and a cause, and now it seemed as if it had all come crashing down around their ears. Or had it? Had the incredible events of the past few days opened a chink of light for the future? Could they dare to hope – something, anything? Little fragments of what they had been told but not properly grasped at the time kept drifting back to their minds. Could the unthinkable be actually happening, in ways they could never have foreseen? Was God truly among them in dramatic grace, bringing to fulfilment the promises of centuries? Did they dare believe that, or would that lead them only to greater pain and danger and betrayal all over again? How confused and frightened they must have been.

And then, their familiar leader was suddenly back among them. At least, he was recognisable, but not exactly the same as the man with whom they had travelled the length and breadth of their country, the one who had sat in their boats and slept in their homes, who had healed the sick and fed the hungry and earned the implacable hatred of the religious leaders of the day, who had taught so clearly and simply and yet sometimes in incomprehensible riddles. Dearly familiar he might be, but there was also an awesome difference, for here was the one who had come back from the dead. Here was Jesus, and here were they, at this breath-taking moment which would shape the rest of their lives. Was this the end, or the beginning?

In that moment, the die was cast. It was the beginning. Only the start of the beginning, to be sure, but nonetheless a pivotal beginning, as men who had walked with Jesus as followers of a leader became worshippers of God among them, Emmanuel, 'God with us'. With painful honesty Matthew tells us that even then 'some doubted', whether because they mistrusted their senses, thought they must be seeing a ghost, or simply could not accept that the Messiah could be crucified, we are not told. But the transition had been made. Companions had become worshippers.

A Never-To-Be-Forgotten Mandate

It is in this highly charged context that the Lord Jesus gives the disciples his final instructions. For centuries, the Church has known the concluding verses of Matthew's Gospel as 'the Great Commission', in the same way that Matthew 22: 37-39 is known as 'the Great Commandment'. There are variant versions in the other Gospels and the beginning of Acts, but it is to Matthew's version that we most naturally turn whenever we think of the Great Commission.

What exactly is it that Jesus chooses to tell his disciples?

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mt 28: 18-20 NIV)

In fact, there is only one command in these verses: 'make disciples of all nations'. But, that command is encircled on the one hand by a breathtaking statement of fact ('all authority in heaven and earth has

been given to me') and on the other by a comprehensive promise ('and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'), and explained by three activities ('as you go', 'baptising', 'teaching').

Jesus' claim to authority is sweeping. There is neither place nor time, nor even heaven or eternity, which falls outside it. It has been given, not seized. It is the authority of one who is equal in status with both Father and Holy Spirit, in other words fully God. No wonder that he can make such a promise. He is Lord of the universe, and King of eternity. In the three years of his public ministry, Jesus has been saying, 'Look! This is what the reign of God looks like. Now you go and do it and live it, too!' Because he is King, he delegates to his subjects the responsibility of demonstrating and explaining life in his kingdom. And, because he is King, he has both the right to do that, and the power to make it happen. For the time being, we may not see the King with our physical sight, though his promise is to be truly present even if invisible. But, when God's servants live the way we are called to live, then onlookers should be able to look on and say, 'Ah, now we can see what living under God's rule is all about – and what kind of King God is'.

The very idea that a mere eleven men, who up till then had not shown themselves especially reliable either in understanding or in faithfulness, should 'make disciples of all nations', is absolutely preposterous. It must rank as one of the most lunatic commands of all time. Yet, set it within the context of the statement and the promise, and suddenly it halts you in your tracks. And that's exactly what happened to those first disciples. The task on its own, and out of context, was insane; but in the light of the Lord's authority and promise, it became their way of life. Without demur, they returned to Jerusalem to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. When he came, at Pentecost, they knew exactly what they were empowered to do, and they did it. They disciplined the nations. First they disciplined the Jews and proselytes of the Dispersion, gathered in Jerusalem from the far corners of the Roman Empire and beyond to celebrate Passover and Pentecost, those great festivals of the Jewish people; and then, through these men and women as they finally returned home, and also through direct apostolic activity, they reached out to the Gentile world beyond.

Going, Baptising And Teaching

Although 'make disciples' is the only imperative in the Greek, Matthew makes it clear that there are inescapable tasks to undertake in order to fulfil the command. Perhaps 'going, baptising and teaching' are illustrative rather than saying all there is to say. Or perhaps, each embraces a significant portion of what is involved in making disciples.

Going

Take 'going'. In the Old Testament, there is often a call to the nations to 'come' to Jerusalem, to come to the Temple. There was even a special part of the Temple set aside for them, the Court of the Gentiles, where Jews were supposed to pray for Gentiles to come to faith in the one true God, and where Gentiles were supposed to be welcomed and instructed in the truth. Sadly, the Jews had lost sight of the purpose for which that part of the Temple had been built, and in any case mostly did not believe that God had anything in store for Gentiles except destruction. By the time of Jesus they had made the Court of the Gentiles the marketplace where the moneychangers and vendors of birds and animals for sacrifice carried out their business and cheated vulnerable pilgrims. It was this that made the Lord Jesus so angry on the famous occasion when he drove the moneychangers and exploitative traders from the Temple (Matt 21:12ff.).

Why had God wanted Gentiles to come to the Temple? Because it should be there, more than anywhere else, that they could find out about the one true and living God. It should be there that they could see the visual aids of sacrifice, and hear of the need for atonement for sin. It should be there that they could hear teaching from the Old Testament writings, and learn to sing the psalms, the songs of faith. It should be among God's people that outsiders would see the dynamic of living for God being worked out in families and in the whole community. Isaiah has a vision (c.f. Is 2) of the nations of the world flowing up to Jerusalem, bringing their worship and their gifts and their tribute. That would be glory indeed! Tragically, over the centuries it would seem that rather few Gentiles were welcomed and brought to faith as they visited Jerusalem.

But now, instead of having the nations come to God's people, the direction changes. Jesus' disciples are to go to the nations. The death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus meant that the sacrificial system, always only a visual aid pointing to the ultimate reality behind, was no longer needed. Jesus' sacrifice of himself was once and for all, complete and final. No longer was there any need for an altar, or even for the Temple. As Jesus died, the great heavy curtain that shut off the innermost part of the Temple had split from top to bottom, dramatically showing how now there is a new living way, open to all, into reconciliation with God. And the coming of the Holy Spirit meant that wherever God's people went, the Spirit who makes his home within them went with them. Wherever the disciples went - about their daily business, in their homes and neighbourhoods, or on intentional journeys to spread the message - they could take the good news of the Cross, and be empowered by the life-giving Spirit, and so 'disciple the nations'. 'As you go,' says Jesus, 'wherever you go, make disciples.'

Baptising

Down through the centuries, there have been many arguments about baptism, usually about who is eligible and at what age, about how much water must be used, and about who is qualified to administer it. Sadly, those arguments have often diverted attention from the simple and central significance of baptism.

When Jesus instructed the eleven disciples to baptise as an intrinsic part of making disciples, what did he mean? Baptism, of course, was not an exclusively Christian ritual. Nor did it begin in Jewish circles only with John the Baptist. It was practised by various Jewish sects, with varying significance. It appeared then, and appears now, in a variety of forms, in both pagan and other religious rituals. Generically, it seems to symbolise purification on the one hand (water washes away dirt) and initiation on the other (the water represents death, so that you go in as one person and emerge as another). Where the emphasis is on initiation, a person undergoes it only once. Where the emphasis is on purification, a person might undergo it repeatedly.

In John the Baptist's ministry, the appeal was to Jews to be baptised as an expression of repentance, recognising the awesome judgement of God on sin and their desperate need for grace and forgiveness. This, of course, was outrageous to many Jews, who believed that the very fact of being descended from Abraham gave them immunity from the wrath of God. But John's message resonated with many ordinary people, whatever their religious leaders might say. They wanted something more real than what they had already. In coming to John for baptism, they were expressing their desire to be on a different footing with God. They were also expressing their commitment to live from then on in a different way from in the past, in the light of God's demands. There was a recognition that God's people together were called to live in a manner that demonstrated God's intentions. John pointed forward to the one who was coming, Jesus, who would baptise not simply with the outward symbol of water but more profoundly with the Spirit who would purify inwardly and initiate into a new empowered way of life, dedicated to the service of God.

This, of course, is precisely what happened at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, promised by Jesus, came to 'indwell' (live in and among) God's people. The disciples are filled with the Spirit, and immediately become God's mouthpiece among the crowds, gathered in Jerusalem from 'every nation under heaven' (Acts 2:5). As Peter preaches his heart out, God is powerfully and most graciously at work. Some three thousand people express repentance and their desire for forgiveness of their sins through baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and so are initiated into the fledgling Christian community.

It is this fledgling community which is to be the place where men and women, boys and girls, are to be disciplined. For this is the community which is called to be the dynamic expression of the character of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a family, transcending biological families, sharing one heavenly Father. It is a redeemed community, sharing salvation from sin and judgement through the one and only Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is an organic community, brought into being and continuously being sustained by the Holy Spirit. Those within this community are to live out the new way of life into which they have been initiated, so that those outside may look on and see who the true and living God is: Creator, Father, Saviour, Judge and Life-giver.

Teaching

If baptism marks a beginning, it is only a beginning! No wonder the Lord Jesus includes 'teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' in the task of making disciples. It is important to realise that the Great Commission is not just about urging people to 'decide to accept Christ', nor about being content to have people baptised, significant though both of these are. Initiation must be followed by progressive and radical change. A disciple is one who engages in an ongoing, close, learning relationship with his teacher. Discipleship involves faithful commitment through thick and thin.

Discipleship does not happen automatically or by accident. Just as a person needs to be nurtured and cared for through infancy and childhood, so a new Christian believer needs to be nurtured and cared for in order to grow into healthy adulthood. Nor do we ever grow out of the need for nurture and care, even though we may simultaneously be both nurturers and nurtured, care-givers and cared-for, because Jesus' disciples are to be formed into communities of people with interlocked and interdependent lives. The Great Commission does not say 'Watch people from all nations become disciples' or even 'Make sure that people from all nations become disciples'. The command is very active! On the one hand, we are to be disciples of Jesus himself, not of some other person, however impressive a Christian leader he or she might be. On the other, the Lord is clearly instructing the Eleven to be directly instrumental in transforming people into disciples, life-long learners, those who are being progressively shaped by Jesus' teaching.

So, the starting point of initiation is to be complemented by ongoing teaching. Moreover, the teaching is to be thoroughly comprehensive, embracing personal and community life, relationship to God and to other people, attitudes, values and deeds, faith for the whole of life. Such was what Jesus had himself taught. Perhaps even more significantly here, this is three-dimensional teaching: teaching not only by word, but lived out in active personal and communal demonstration. It is at every level and in every form: one-to-one, in groups, in crowds; formal and informal; occasional and sustained; in official places of worship, in homes, in workplaces. Further, this is no casual pooling of ideas or tentative suggestion: Jesus' teaching is to be received and obeyed. The task of making disciples revolves around training in obeying Jesus' teaching.

Clearly, this is no 'been there, done that' kind of agenda. When could you ever say that a nation, or even a person or small group, had been discipled as a totally completed task, with no more to be learned or taught, nothing more to be obeyed? What the Lord is describing here is breathtaking, not only in geographical and demographic extent, but also in scope and depth.

It is hard to imagine how that little band of men felt as they made their way back from Galilee to Jerusalem. At one level, nothing had changed. They were still a small, strangely assorted company of ex-fishermen and artisans, who had recently lived through deep trauma. They were still caught up in adjusting their dreams and hopes and expectations, still coming to terms with their leader's absence, still terrifyingly vulnerable to the violence and hatred of those who had so recently crucified their Lord. And yet, at another level, they weren't the same at all. Not only had they been transformed from followers into worshippers, they had also been entrusted with the most amazing mandate to change the world. Did they walk their several days' journey in stunned silence or in animated planning? Did they

wonder how in the world they would do what they had been told to do? Did they simply hang on to that breath-taking statement – their Lord Jesus had all authority in heaven and on earth – and the equally breath-taking promise, that he would be with them every step of the way, whether or not they could see him with their physical eyes?

However it was, the significance of that encounter with the risen Christ has reverberated down through the years of history ever since.

Some Questions To Think About

1. Imagine yourself to be one of the Eleven, walking back to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension. What do you think you would have talked about? How would you have felt about Jesus' instruction? Now imagine yourself to be one of the disciples immediately following Pentecost. How would this have transformed your response to the Great Commission?
2. In what ways do you as an individual, and the Christian community to which you belong, disciple others 'as you go' about each day's business? What might going, baptising and teaching mean in practice for you today?
3. The Lord Jesus states that there is no person, and no place, outside his eternal authority. How should that affect our relationships with unbelievers, and with often anti-Christian cultures?
4. How can we keep 'growing' as disciples, and as disciple-makers, all our lives long?