

# Fulfilling the Great Commission

## Congregational-Style

### Examining the Motive for Mission

A Paper for the consideration of the  
Congregational Theological Society

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It will be my attempt in this paper to 1) articulate a rounded and thick description of the collection of passages in the New Testament that comprise what has come to be known as the Great Commission; to 2) contextualize culturally the applicability and the application of that commission for the broader Christian church, (a process that now seems to need constant attention) ; and to 3) evaluate the congregational flavor and philosophy as preserved in the NACCC as a vessel for the fulfilling of this commission.

**Matthew 28:16** Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17**When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18**Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19**Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20**and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

**Acts 1:8** But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

**Mark 16:14** Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

**15**He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. **16**Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. **17**And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; **18**they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

The occasion of the transmission of the Commission to the eleven well-trained disciples came about as the result of clear communication of instructions and a united willingness to carry out those instructions. This group of men had been struggling with doubts, with career choices, with disappointment, with the possible magnitude of what Jesus' post-resurrection appearances had meant for them and for mankind, and with ongoing fear of the Roman authorities. But collectively they seem to have arrived at the conclusion that Peter had drawn much earlier when Jesus had asked him if he was going to join many others who were finding the sayings and the prerequisites of following Jesus too hard.

**John 6:8** Simon Peter replied, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words that give eternal life. **6:9** We believe, and we know you are the Holy One of God."

It would have been a somewhat awkward meeting. The doubts and the fears and the disappointments were still lingering, just as they do in every congregational worship gathering. Heaven, I think, is going to be when everyone is united in belief and purpose. Or maybe I underestimate the power of Pentecost to usher in that unity.

In any event, some doubted yet. But others acted on a growing understanding that this resurrected man was worthy of their worship. So when Jesus declared to them that all authority, both on earth and in heaven had been given to Him, their hearts, for the most part, were ready to listen and receive. They perhaps recalled the day when, returning from their second mission of preaching and healing with sixty of their apprentices, they had seen the joy in Jesus' face as they reported that both sicknesses and demons had had to submit to their authority. (Luke 10) Furthermore, the magnitude of the several post-resurrection appearances they had been a part of was indeed settling upon their souls.

The text indicates that they worshipped from a distance, but when it was time for Jesus to deliver their commission, it says that He drew near to them. Because of the authority that has been given to me, he told them, authority that is unbounded, I hereby commission you to the greatest assignment ever given to anyone on the face of the earth. What I have done with you and for you over these past three years, I am assigning you to do as well. You who are of apostolic stature by virtue of being called and chosen by the Master, you are to reproduce yourselves in like manner. You are to multiply yourselves twelve-fold and more. I have chosen one nation, Israel, out of which I came, and out of which you came. I have breathed my Spirit into you and I will soon go way beyond the symbolic and impart that Spirit incontrovertibly and tangibly. And so I ask you to go and, in your going, to make disciples of all the nations.

In a paper I presented here some three years ago, I proposed a somewhat intensive paradigm of discipleship modelled on the way Jesus trained his disciples. I recall a question that was put to me here, and which has been repeated in my own church fellowship. That question goes something like this: "Won't the intensity and intentionality of a discipleship that leads to the effective discipling of the nations make some people uncomfortable? And what will you do with those people for whom such discipleship is not a desirable thing? "

My answer then and now is that those people should be loved and nurtured in every possible way, but that church polity and programming should not be designed around them. It should be designed around those who are gathered at the mountain where Jesus told them to gather. It should be designed for those who embrace the commission. And it should be designed for the not-yet Christians among all the nations that Jesus came to save. (**Luke 19:10** For the Son of Man came to **seek** and **save** those who are lost.") As Jesus presented his lofty expectations to those eleven, so we today should present lofty expectations to our eleven. And it is with and on those eleven that we should spend the lion's share of our lives and ministry energy. If each one of them can multiply love and care and themselves, we will have created pastoral leadership for hundreds and even thousands of people. For me, this represents an enormous paradigm shift; one that I long to grasp and adopt; but one that has all the ramparts of institutional church maintenance arrayed against it.

In his recent study entitled WHERE CONGREGATIONALISM (IS?) IN GROWING THE FAMILY OF CHRIST? Jon S. Hanson, on behalf of and in connection with the Congregational Church Development Division of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, points out that to revitalize or reproduce many NA churches would be of questionable value. I would agree. I'm not sure reproducing the fellowship where I am

privileged to serve as pastor would be a good idea yet. He argues that the discipling, great commission heart of the gospel must be stated in the mission statement of the CCDD to prevent that kind of fruitless replication. And of course, a mission statement must then become a mission.

Jesus knew that each of his disciples had his particular strengths and weaknesses. He knew the same about the 120 who would soon gather in Jerusalem to await the promise of Joel's prophecy. But He gave to all the blanket task of making disciples, and He made it perfectly clear that they were to make ready to cross racial, cultural, and religious borders to do so. And as Hanson has called the CCDD to a Great Commission focus, we could ask the same of our Missionary Society and of all congregationalists whose support it depends on. Bold and ongoing campaigns with baptism and thorough biblical training as their targets must define the 21st Century congregational church if it is to be obedient to its commission.

The expanding circle of evangelism and discipleship, summarized in the Matthew 28 version of the commission with the words "every nation", is reiterated in the Acts 1 version, where Jerusalem and Judea describe the culture we live in and Samaria and the ends of the earth describe the crossing of cultural borders. Mark's interpretation says the same thing in these words: Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.

As a new member of the Congregational Mission Society, I am excited to delve for the remainder of this paper into the missiological rings of this expanding circle. My presuppositions are thoroughly evangelical, and my convictions are that the prioritizing of a global passion for evangelism is an integral and vital part of an obedient and healthy church. I believe that if we neglect the ends of the earth because "we've got enough problems right here", we will wither and die.

"It wasn't until comparatively recent times that a special consideration of mission principles and practice became a part of theological study. Prior to this time many regarded the missionary movement simply as a historical phenomenon. They took the biblical foundation of mission work pretty much for granted. As a result for a long time, as Johannes Verkuyl states, "missiology was accorded no place in the encyclopedia of theology. She was not even given standing room." " So says Ernst Wendland. There are (today) some 150 schools offering graduate degrees in missiology or mission studies. While the large majority are equipped to grant only a Master's Degree, a few also award Doctorates in missiology at the D.Miss., D.Min., or Ph.D. levels. Included in recent surveys are: The School of World Mission of Fuller Theological Seminary,

Pasadena, CA; The E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, Wilmore, KY; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL; Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, IL; Columbia Biblical Seminary and Graduate School of Missions, Columbia, SC; Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, KS; William Carey International University, Pasadena, CA; and the Institute of Mission Studies at Saint Paul University, Ottawa, ON (Myklebust 1989:92; Anderson 1991:167).

Congregationalism's role in the fulfilling of the Great Commission and its engagement in missiology was acknowledged in its participation in the Eastern half of the recent bi-Centennial celebration of the Haystack Prayer Meeting in 2006 at Williams College where five students launched the modern missionary movement. Here, briefly, is their story. They had been gathering at the congregational church in Williamstown under the care of the pastor and an older woman in the church whose ministry was prayer. The spiritual climate on the Williams campus, as it was throughout New England colleges at the time, was tepid at best. The pastor died shortly after the famous prayer meeting under a haystack on a stormy August afternoon in 1806, but the five students went on to lay the foundations for a global movement that is now an indelible part of Christian history. It was their passionate faith coupled with their growing understanding of world politics and geography that they had been studying at Williams that ignited this movement. It was God's time.

Perhaps congregationalism's most relevant link to post-modern missiology, however, comes almost 200 years earlier when Jon Eliot created a Massachusetts alphabet, translated the Bible using that alphabet, bore witness of the gospel to that tribe and other tribes, and established numerous indigenous communities of Indians who had trusted in Christ for their salvation. His insight into the importance of bringing Christ in without denigrating or destroying the culture of those being reached was partially lost when the missionary movement got too closely aligned with 19th century colonialism, but has been revived in current missiological theology and methodology in the concept of contextualization.

I referred above to the Eastern half of the Haystack bi-Centennial . The western half took place in Madison, WI a week later and it featured the same speaker, Dr. Lamin Sannah, author of "Whose Religion is Christianity?". His comments in Madison about a noticeable ambivalence at the Eastern meeting concerning the meaning and outworking of the Great Commission cut to the heart of a great theological challenge the NA faces as it addresses that Commission. There were clearly two divergent theological perspectives being expressed by speakers throughout the celebration. The Western meeting in Madison was evangelical through and through. The Eastern meeting was marked by a theological tension that was tangible.

What is the commission of the church? Missiology in the past 100

years has grappled with that question and drawn significant lines of demarcation. Ernest Wendland of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary has offered a concise evaluation current missiology that categorizes viewpoints as follows: The World Council of Churches view: The Evangelical View: The Church Growth View: and the Roman Catholic View.

The WCC, though it didn't officially form until 1948, emerged from a series of global meetings to address the Great Commission, beginning with the YMCA's John Mott presiding in Edinburgh (1910). At that point, as Wendland describes it, "it was still assumed that Christianity was God's absolute revelation for the salvation of mankind. In Jerusalem in 1928, the impact of a devastating world war and the rise of the social gospel, evangelical theology was beginning to give way. By 1938, when the International Missionary Council met in Tambaram, India, where the famous Hocking Report essentially declared all world religions equally beneficial to mankind, while not adopted, clearly reflected a strong theological shift that would require a redefining of the nature of the church's mission. By Uppsala, in 1968, to quote Wendland,

More and more the liberal theology of modern Protestantism stifled any real concern for evangelism. The "Christian Presence" school of thought, which argued that the "spirit of Christ" could be found in other religions even though the Savior wasn't mentioned by name, gained in influence. Mission work, if we can call it such, was more a matter of "dialogue" with those of other faiths, chiefly to see how the gap between Christianity and other religions could best be bridged. The goal of "mission" as stated at Uppsala in 1968 was "to offer the world the new humanity in Christ." Mankind's physical and social needs became a "prime responsibility" for the Christian church. "Humanization" became the goal of mission, and "salvation" was regarded as "any liberating experience." (p.3)

The disenchantment of the evangelicals with the trend toward theological liberalism resulted in the Lausanne conventions in 1966 and 1974 and Pattay, Thailand in 1980, where the Great Commission was seen as a life and death matter. A significant percentage of the 55,000 full-time missionaries of the world, not surprisingly, come from this group. The evangelicals had been fully on board at Edinburgh, but had completely jumped ship by 1960. The Church Growth Movement under Donald McGavren became a strong arm of the Lausanne branch. The late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, represents another

movement that has been a haven for orthodox interpreters of the call to the ends of the earth.

What are we to make of the ambivalence toward the Great Commission that seems inevitably to ensue from the theological breadth of the NA? One possible approach (only partially tongue-in-cheek) is a partnership whereby the theologically more liberal elements focus on the Great Commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, while the evangelicals work on the Commission to make disciples of all the nations. The liberals dig the well and draw the water and the evangelicals preach the Word and baptize them in the newly-accessed well water.

The fear for the evangelical is that the passion for reaching the lost (if, in fact, there are none) will be snuffed out. Certainly the priority of global mission is markedly lower in the NA than in an evangelically unified group like the Christian and Missionary Alliance, under whose auspices I ministered for 15 years. Do we want to convert the Buddhists of Laos to a life-transforming faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Or do we want to encourage them to be good Buddhists and improve their prospects for a comfortable life?

The fear of the theologically more liberal has been that we will Bible-thump people into a form of western churchianity devoid of compassion and insensitive to their native culture.

Hopefully, the fears at both ends of this spectrum are overwrought. Perhaps we could learn from one of Congregationalism's most interesting early missiologists Orishatukeh Faduma (1857-1946) from Sierra Leone, a graduate of Yale Divinity School. He said this:

Let us have a Christian life and thought expressed in Africa, not after the manner of a Frenchman, an American, or the Englishman, but assimilated into African. Let Christianity planted become native to the soil, growing from within and without, but losing none of its manhood and inherent vitality... If Christian religion is not the white man's religion, but the religion of Jesus Christ, having life to support every race, let it have a trial on these ethnic races... Everyone has a peculiar contribution to make to the sum total of spiritual and moral life. Christianity has not reached its highest achievements until all the races of mankind have brought in their contribution to the foot of the cross.

The problem was that the congregationalists who ordained this leader were never able to raise enough money to support him on the field. But it is encouraging to note that African and Asian and South American Christianity has eclipsed our more intellectual Western version, both in numbers and in influence, and it is important to note that this equatorial center of Christian influence is markedly evangelical.

It would be my preliminary observation that our missions contacts in Mexico, Argentina, and Myanmar, the fields I have had at least some exposure to, are more conservative in their theology and more evangelical in their approach to ministry than is the overall NA that supports them.

No one then could have predicted the remarkable resurgence and revitalization of global research and scholarship in missiology. The results are overwhelming and astounding. We can only ascribe them to the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

But the fundamental question is whether or not the revitalization of missiology has been matched by the revitalization of the church's missionizing action. At the dawn of millennium three, several compelling questions emerge on the horizon with regard to the relationship between missiological revitalization and missional renaissance.

First, will the worldwide church benefit from and be able to utilize the rich resources made available to her by missiological research over the past 25 years, or will she simply go about her business as usual and allow the treasures in the data banks to become obsolete?

Second, will missiology be faithful to its humble calling in being a true servant, a genuine handmaiden of the church by assisting her in the interpretation and implementation of the data to carry out her mission most effectively and expeditiously in our fallen world, or will it simply glory in its academic achievements?

Third, will the professors of missiology and the executives of

mission agencies, together with the church around the globe, pool their energies and resources to bring the whole gospel to the whole world, or will the first two bypass the third and all three simply miss their God-given mission in the world?

Fourth, will missiology be able to sustain its present status of recognition as an academic discipline by the worldwide church when it is being ignored by the secular academics and marginalized by theologians and other academicians at the seminary level as Myklebust's research (1989:87ff) points out?

The growth of existing churches, the number new churches planted and/or the number of existing churches renewed should not be our ultimate goals. Nor is the expansion of Congregationalism the ultimate goal. Instead, all objectives are, or should be, subordinate to the mission purpose of advancing God's Kingdom.

The population of the United States of America just crossed the 300,000,000 mark last month.

Growth rates: Pentecostals: 8.1%  
Evangelicals: 5.4%;  
All Protestants: 3.3%  
Roman Catholics and Others: 1.3%

Since the growth rate of humanity is above 1.4%, the "market share" of Roman Catholicism and others appears to be slowly dropping.

Missiologist Ralph Winter estimated in early 2001 that there are 680 million "*born again*" Christians in the world, and that they are growing at about 7% a year. This represents about 11% of the world's population and 33% of the total number of Christians. 6