

Commentary: 5 things churchgoers need to know about the Great Commission

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What did Jesus' appointment calendar look like on the days following his resurrection?

Following his earth-shaking exit from the tomb, Jesus appeared to 10 of the disciples who were meeting in Jerusalem, he walked with Cleopas and his friend on the Emmaus road, he directed the disciples to a huge catch of fish, he instructed Peter to "feed my lambs," and he later met the disciples on a mountain where he gave to them what we commonly call the Great Commission.

Recently, the Barna Group released the results of a survey indicating that 51 percent of churchgoers are not familiar with the Great Commission, a bothersome bit of data for anyone concerned about advancing God's kingdom. Of greater concern, perhaps, is that among those who are familiar, many have a limited view of this core assignment. Many presuppose that the Great Commission is given to pastors. Or they rationalize that the commission is given to an advanced group of Christians such as missionaries, deacons, elders, or other lay leaders.

Matthew 28:18-20 is the most common Scripture referred to as the Great Commission:

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, baptizing 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” (NIV).

As a resident of a community adjacent to a naval base, I understand the act of “commissioning” to be serious business, a charge to deploy with radical loyalty. When an officer is commissioned, that officer takes a vow to serve and is given a mission for life. When a ship is commissioned, that ship is given a name and a strategic assignment.

Following the resurrection, when Jesus’ charged his disciples with this strategic assignment, his words became their *modus operandi*.

After an inspiring Easter celebration, this is a great week to revisit this pivotal mandate. Here are five things every church goer needs to know about the Great Commission:

1. The commission is to make disciples.

First, *disciple* is a unique word which implies “more than a follower.” It refers to a student who learns from a mentor or a master teacher. The Greek word for disciple, *matheteuo*, is similar to our English words *apprentice* or *mentee*. It refers to a deeper, ongoing learning process.

Second, the call is to make “disciples,” not just “decisions.” We often talk about leading others to make a decision for Christ. And volitional decisions are crucial to beginning this journey of following and learning from Jesus. But leading others to make “decisions” without providing an orientation to the “disciple life” is both counterproductive to the kingdom and confusing to the supposed convert or confirmed.

2. The directive is “as you go.”

In the English translations, we emphasize more of an imperative to drop what you are doing and “go.” While some will be called to be pastors, evangelists and missionaries who veer from their career path to follow the call to vocation ministry, the overwhelming majority will engage in incarnational ministry through their chosen career path. In the Greek translation, there is more of a sense of sharing this good news “as you go.” In other words, we are to be engaged in the enterprise of disciple-making “as you go,” “wherever you go” and in “whatever you do.”

3. The mandate is communal.

This assignment is given to the group, not just to a single individual. Great Commission work is teamwork with significant individual contribution and overarching group cooperation. No one person fulfills the Great Commission alone, but rather by investing their best gifts in kingdom service. There are no insignificant tasks in working toward this mission.

In the local church, for example, team members include those who tend the nursery, sing in the choir or on the worship team, preach and teach, spend time in the prayer room, drive the bus and more. On the mission field, team members include those who make financial contributions, translate the language, plot logistics, teach life skills and articulate the story of the good news.

No one church or denomination can fulfill the commission alone, which means that, to maximize progress in implementation, churches of different stripes should collaborate around the mission, not compete with each other.

4. The scope of the mission is international.

Jesus charged the disciples to take the mission to all nations and ethnicities. Later, in Acts 1:8, Jesus elaborates further by extending the mission to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost regions of the earth.

5. Jesus promised to be with the disciples in this work.

Jesus assured his disciples that he would be with them as they engaged in their mission, even “until the end of the age.” Before his ascension, Jesus informed the disciples that even when his physical presence had departed, he would send his Spirit to comfort, teach and strengthen them. And the Spirit continues to empower and embolden those who engage in this mission in our day.

At its core, Christianity is not assent or affirmation of a doctrinal formula. Rather, the Christian faith is rooted and grounded in a relational commitment to learn and follow the way of Jesus. For sure, Christians believe in grace, forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ. But Christians also believe that the Jesus way of life is the best, most effective, most fulfilling way to live.

Eugene Peterson translates the commission found in Matthew 28 simply and succinctly: “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age” (The Message).

Easter people take the Great Commission seriously. And Easter people join hands and hearts with those like and unlike themselves to engage in the mission.

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