

# Renewing the Great Commission

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According to numerous studies, most Americans consider themselves “spiritual, not religious.” In other words, they dabble in whatever beliefs and practices that they find intuitively valid and useful for daily living, but they resist any threat to their individual autonomy. Consumers in the spiritual marketplace they are willing to be, but not disciples of Jesus Christ. In spite of all the evangelistic efforts over the last several decades, including sprawling megachurches catering to every niche market, there has been no growth in reported conversions. In fact, church attendance is on the decline. Most Christians cannot articulate what they believe, much less why they believe it, and these tragic statistics include evangelicals as well as Unitarians.

We do not lack impassioned pleas for being more “missional.” A plethora of programs for outreach, discipleship, and spiritual disciplines are available at any Christian bookstore and on countless websites. Yet what we need most is a renewed understanding of and commitment to the Great Commission. We assume that we already know the nature of this Commission. We assume that we know its message, although the statistics do not bear that out. We assume that we already know the appropriate methods, although our feverish activism seems to lack the power of previous missionary movements.

In this brief space I want to explore some of the radical aspects of the mandate that Jesus gave to his church before he ascended to the Father.

## 1. The Indicative: Jesus Has All Authority

**“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18).**

Every new covenant command is grounded in the gospel. We confess our faith in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church,” not because we can see it nor because of any vain confidence that we can build it. We believe that the church is *one* because there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5).

Despite all appearances to the contrary, we believe that this church is *catholic* (universal), because it is not a communion of friends I chose for myself, but a family that God has chosen from all of eternity in his Son. The world carves humanity into niche demographics, segmenting its ever-narrower markets. However, in the electing, redeeming, and renewing grace of the Triune God, a new society is being called into being whose catholicity is determined by only one demographic niche: namely, that it consists of those who are “in Christ” and no longer “in Adam.” To update Paul’s list in Galatians 3:28, we may say that in Christ there is neither Boomer nor Buster, Republican or Democrat, Wal-Mart or boutique shopper. We are one and catholic not because we have the same playlists on our iPods or because we share the same experiences, hobbies, and stages of life, but because we are in Christ.

We believe that this church is also *holy*, not because of its empirical piety, but because God has made Jesus Christ “our wisdom, and our righteousness and holiness and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). In fact, Paul addresses the Corinthian believers as “the church of God that is in Corinth...

sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Cor. 1:2). Only on the basis of this indicative announcement of their holiness in Christ does the apostle rebuke and exhort the immature Corinthian church to correct its worldly attitudes and behaviors. And finally, the church is apostolic not because we can identify living apostles or successors of the apostles in the world today, but because the Spirit is still active in delivering Christ to sinners through the public ministry of Word and sacrament.

So the church is what it is not because of its own decision, planning, and zealous activity, but because of God’s. The triumphant indicative—announcing the achievements of the Triune God—always comes first. God’s gracious performance creates a church in the midst of this present evil age that imperfectly responds by saying “Amen!” in word and deed to all that God has willed it to be. Only because it is in Christ is there an assembly of sinners drawn from every people and language that has been transferred from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of everlasting life.

The priority of the indicative is evident also in the Great Commission. Often, we begin with the imperative when reciting this Commission. However, there is no reason to go into all the world as Christ’s ambassadors apart from the work that he has already accomplished. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” This is the rationale for everything that the church is called to do and to be. We must never take Christ’s work for granted. The gospel is not merely something that we take to unbelievers; it is the Word that created and continues to sustain the whole church in its earthly pilgrimage. In addition, we must never confuse Christ’s work with our own. There is a lot of loose talk these days about our “living the gospel” or even “being the gospel,” as if our lives could be anything more than an ambiguous testimony to the gospel. We even hear it said that the church is an extension of Christ’s incarnation and redeeming work, as if Jesus came to provide the moral example or template and we are called to complete his work.

There is one Savior and one head of the church to whom all authority is given, in heaven and on earth. There is only one incarnation of God in history and he finished the work of fulfilling all righteousness, bearing the curse, and triumphing over sin and death. The church comes into being not as an extension or further completion of Christ’s saving work, but as a result of it. On the verge of Good Friday, Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:1-3).

There can be no renewal of the Great Commission without a renewal of the church’s conviction that it not only came into being but is sustained in every moment by the preaching of the gospel. Taken from the language of the battlefield, *euangelion* means “good news” of military victory, which was brought back to the capitol by a herald or ambassador. The Great Commission begins not with an imperative, a plan, a strategy for our victory in the world, but with the announcement that Christ has conquered sin and death. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). “Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God,” Paul tells the Corinthians, “we do not lose heart. . . . And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing” (2 Cor. 4:1, 3). “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us

to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (2 Cor. 5:18, 20). Ambassadors do not create the constitution. They do not forge foreign and domestic policy. They simply announce liberation and communicate the new constitution of Christ’s heavenly colony on earth.

In these Pauline references, as in the Great Commission itself, the primary audience is the circle of the apostles. Their ministry was extraordinary. Called directly by God incarnate, they were eyewitnesses of his majesty (2 Pet. 1:16). They laid the foundation upon which the ordinary ministers would build Christ’s end-time sanctuary (1 Cor. 3:11). This extraordinary ministry came to an end, but the ordinary ministry continues through those, like Timothy, who were called by God indirectly through the laying on of hands by the body of elders (1 Tim. 4:15; cf 1 Tim. 5:17-19; Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5; 3 John 1:1; Jas. 5:14). Although the special office of ambassador has been entrusted to ministers and elders, the Spirit makes all believers witnesses to Christ.

Therefore, Christ’s ascension to the right hand of the Father creates the confidence that our going will not be in vain. As Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4, Christ in his ascension and heavenly reign dispenses the gifts of pastors and teachers to build up the body into its head. The same Word that creates and sustains the church’s own existence and growth is proclaimed to the world, so that Christ’s kingdom expands to the ends of the earth.

Jesus had already prepared the disciples for his departure and the sending of the Spirit (John 14-16). He had told the apostles, “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18-19). Christ himself has redeemed his church and is now building his church in the power of his Word and Spirit. It is not a kingdom that we are *building*, but a kingdom that we are *receiving* (Heb. 12:28).

## **2. The Imperative: Make Disciples**

**“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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20).**

On the basis of this triumphant indicative of Christ’s victory, Jesus commands, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”

### **A. Deep and Wide**

This command is extensive (“all nations”) and intensive (“make disciples”). First, it is wide in its extensiveness. Not only are the nations streaming to Zion; Zion itself is mobile, empowered to witness to Christ by the Spirit at Pentecost. In Christ, the “unclean” (Gentiles) are made holy. The temple complex consisted of three areas: the Most Holy Place at the center, the Court of the Jews, and the outer Court of the Gentiles. However, Christ is now the temple and through faith in him all peoples have free access to the throne of God. The dividing wall between Jews and

Gentiles has been demolished. Echoing the tripartite structure of the temple precincts, Jesus, at his ascension, tells his disciples to wait for the Spirit's descent so that they may become his witnesses "in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Second, this commission is wide in its intensiveness. The disciples are called to make disciples, not just converts. In the New Testament context, a disciple is first of all a learner—a student, who followed a rabbi and listened carefully to his instruction by word and deed. We recall Mary Magdalene, "who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching." "But [her sister] Martha was distracted with much serving." Martha complained to Jesus that she was doing all of the work, but Jesus replied, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

Renewing the Great Commission begins with the right understanding of discipleship. Of course, there is work to be done, but first there is a work to be received. Paul reminds us that works-righteousness is our vain attempt to ascend into the heavens, while the righteousness that is by faith receives Christ as he descends to us through the Word that is preached (Rom 10:5-10). "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (v. 17). This is why we need a faithful ministry of the Word: "But how are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" (vv. 14-15). Christ and his benefits are not a reward for the zealous and pious activists, but a gift (Rom. 4:4). The writer to the Hebrews calls the covenant of grace a testament, like the last will and testament that bestows an inheritance on its beneficiaries (Heb. 9:15-17).

Upon Christ's death, this will and testament went into effect and now it is being read to all who inherit it through faith alone. Disciples are first of all those who gladly hear and embrace the indicative to which I have already referred. Like Mary Magdalene, they cherish every word from their Savior's lips. The character in their own "show about nothing" has died and they are now a new character in God's unfolding drama. They delight in learning who they are in Christ and the inheritance that is theirs in him.

Yet disciples also love and serve their neighbors. They use their gifts to build up the body of Christ and to fulfill their secular callings as parents, co-workers, employees, employers, citizens, and volunteers. Defined by God's story rather than the dead-end plots of this fading age, their activity in the world is decisively changed. Beneficiaries of all heavenly blessings in Christ by grace alone, through faith alone, they are no longer driven to good works out of fear of punishment or the hope of reward, but simply because of their neighbor's need. As Martin Luther said, "God does not need your good works; your neighbor does." All good gifts come down from God to us and then out to our neighbors through our service and witness.

## **B. The Means of Disciple-Making**

We have a tendency to focus on the making of converts, but the Great Commission calls us to make disciples. There are myriad strategies, programs, and routines for discipleship on offer today. However, many of them focus on private spiritual disciplines. While many of these disciplines are helpful, they are subordinate to the methods that Jesus Christ mandated in his Great Commission. His methods focus on making individuals into members of his body. Especially as Americans, we are a practically-minded lot. In fact, we are pragmatists, eager to go before we know what we are doing. However, Jesus does not simply give us a message and say, “Go...” He also includes not only the goal but the methods or means: “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, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20a).

It was especially in the Second Great Awakening that the centrality of human decision and effort became especially dominant. As Roger Olson observes, the nineteenth-century evangelist Charles Finney was closer to Pelagianism than Arminianism.<sup>1</sup> Rejecting the doctrines of original sin, substitutionary atonement, justification through faith, and the miraculous character of the new birth,<sup>2</sup> the evangelist insisted that salvation was due entirely to human decision and effort. Consequently, the new birth is as dependent on predictable laws of cause-and-effect efficiency as any other natural process. Although Finney’s cause-and-effect view shares superficial similarities with the Roman Catholic concept of *ex opere operato* sacramental efficacy, there are two crucial differences: (1) he claimed this efficacy for his new measures rather than for the sacraments that Christ ordained and (2) he denied that their efficacy depended even ultimately on God’s grace.

Just as the new birth lies entirely in the hands of the individual, through whatever “excitements” are likely to “induce repentance,” the church is conceived primarily as a society of moral reformers. In a letter on revival, Finney issued the following, “Now the great business of the church is to reform the world—to put away every kind of sin. The church of Christ was originally organized to be a body of reformers... to reform individuals, communities, and governments.” If the churches will not follow, they will simply have to be left behind, Finney contended.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Olson, *Arminian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005), 28 (including footnote 20). Furthermore, I have been amazed that Arminian friends like Methodist theologian Thomas Oden have defended core evangelical (i.e., Reformation) teachings like justification even while some conservative Protestants seem to be losing their interest in the doctrine. Clearly, the theological divide in our day is less denominational than it is theological.

<sup>2</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology* (reprinted, Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976), 31, 46, 57, 206, 209, 236, 320-322

<sup>3</sup> Charles Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1835), 184-204. “Law, rewards, and punishments—these things and such as these are the very heart and soul of moral suasion....My brethren, if ecclesiastical bodies, colleges, and seminaries will only go forward--who will not bid them God speed? But if they will not go forward--if we hear nothing from them but complaint, denunciation, and rebuke in respect to almost every branch of reform, what can be done?”

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Remarkably, Finney seems to have been fully convinced that Scripture provided clear commands for social reform while remaining virtually silent on the ministry of the church. Eventually, the new measures instituted in the protracted meeting (or revival) were adopted as regular features in many regular church services. The chancel, with its prominent pulpit, font, and table, were often replaced with a stage, a choir, and, of course, the very mobile preachers, unchained—literally and often metaphorically—from the text they were expounding. It was no longer clear to many at least what role that the ordinary preaching of the Word, teaching, administration of the sacraments, discipline, and diaconal care fit in and increasingly the burden for outreach, fellowship, and mercy ministries shifted to parachurch agencies.

Given this orientation, it is not surprising that “means of grace” do not seem as relevant as practical methods of attaining our own personal and social transformation, church growth, and daily problem-solving. *If salvation is not a miracle, then the church is not a miracle. If salvation can be orchestrated through clever methods calculated for pragmatic success in terms of numbers, then church growth is a purely natural phenomenon based on the same methods as any other business.* Finney defined his “new measures” as “inducements sufficient to convert sinners with.”<sup>4</sup> At least Jonathan Edwards had taught that a revival was “a surprising work of God,” an extraordinary blessing of God’s ordinary means of grace. However, Finney insisted, “A revival is not a miracle.” In fact, “There is nothing in religion beyond the ordinary powers of nature. It consists in the right exercise of the powers of nature. It is just that, and nothing else... It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means—as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.”<sup>5</sup> “God Has Established No Particular Measures” is a chapter subheading in Finney’s *Systematic Theology*. “A revival will decline and cease,” he warned, “unless Christians are frequently re-converted.”<sup>6</sup> A revival could be planned, staged, and managed. The Great Commission just said, “Go,” says Finney. “*It did not prescribe any forms.* It did not admit any... And [the disciples’] object was to make known the gospel in the *most effectual way*... so as to obtain attention and secure obedience of the greatest number possible. No person can find any *form* of doing this laid down in the Bible.”<sup>7</sup> This may seem like an odd interpretation, since the substance of the Great Commission is to preach, baptize, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, Finney held to an *ex opere operato* view of his own new measures that he would never allow to baptism and the Supper. As for Pelagian charge, Finney’s *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1976) explicitly denies original sin and insists that the power of regeneration lies in the sinner’s own hands, rejects any substitutionary notion of Christ’s atonement in favor of the moral influence and moral government theories, and regards the doctrine of justification by an alien righteousness as “impossible and absurd.” In fact, Roger Olson, in his defense of Arminianism, sees Finney’s theology as well beyond the Arminian pale (*Arminian Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006], 27). Thus, it is all the more remarkable that Finney occupies such a distinguished place among evangelicals, as the tribute to him in the Billy Graham Center (Wheaton, IL) illustrates. It is little wonder that American religion struck Bonhoeffer as “Protestantism without the Reformation.”

<sup>5</sup> Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 4-5

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 321

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Michael Pasquarello III, *Christian Preaching: A Trinitarian Theology of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 24<sup>8</sup> George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 37

teach. Renewing the Great Commission requires a renewal of our appreciation not only for the gospel of grace but for the means of grace.

### **C. Preaching the Gospel**

The entire Bible, of course, is the Word of God. However, this Word consists of law and gospel. The law commands, telling us what we must do and threatening death for transgression; the gospel promises, telling us what God has done in Christ for our salvation. The law brings conviction, discerning our hidden thoughts and motives as well as our outward actions, so that every mouth is stopped in God's courtroom. The gospel brings the glad tidings that, although our righteousness is as filthy rags in God's sight, God clothes us in Christ's perfect righteousness. This is why the apostles emphasize that it is the gospel that is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16; cf. Mark 8:38; 1 Cor. 1:18, 24; 2:9). Peter tells us that we have been "born again... through the living and abiding word of God... And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Pet. 1:23, 25). The gospel does not merely tell us how to "get saved," as though it were an instruction manual; it is the means through which God actually saves sinners.

In preaching, I am a recipient. I do not ascend to heaven, climbing ladders through various spiritual exercises. Rather, I am made a beneficiary of all of God's promises in his Son. Similarly, in baptism, I am not the active party, but the recipient of God's covenantal act of ratifying his pledge. God has chosen *means* of grace that fit with the *message* of grace.

The Great Commission and in particular the preaching of the gospel at its heart is often associated with outreach to unbelievers. Sometimes there are "evangelistic services" for this purpose. However, in the Scriptures life-long believers are the subjects of weekly evangelization.

Christ's mandate is not only to preach the gospel to those outside of the church, or on special occasions within the church (hoping that non-Christians might be present). It is to preach the gospel weekly to believer and unbeliever alike, reading the last will and testament to its beneficiaries, exploring all of the vast benefits of our inheritance in Christ. A church that takes the gospel for granted takes Christ for granted.

### **D. "Baptizing Them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"**

In the covenant of grace, God takes believers and their children into his care, promising them his favor. When the crowd gathered at Pentecost was "cut to the quick" through Peter's proclamation of Christ, they asked, "What shall we do?" And Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:37-39). By this gospel message, Peter relates, "you will be saved, you and all your household" (Acts 11:14).

Like circumcision, baptism is represented in the New Testament as God's decision and claim on us. Although it obligates us to respond in faith and obedience, baptism is God's sign and seal of

his covenant oath. In this act, God pledges his commitment to us. In Acts, adult converts are baptized and there are reports of their bringing their entire family to be baptized (Acts 16:15; 16:33; cf. 1 Cor. 1:16 and 7:14). Of course, many Christians today do not practice the baptism of covenant children, mainly out of the conviction that baptism is chiefly or even exclusively a human act of commitment rather than a divine means of grace. However, Peter's assurance that "the promise is for you and for your children..." means that the Great Commission begins with the covenant family and includes "those who are far off, as many as the Lord our God calls to himself."

If our children are not growing up in the treasures of the Christian faith, then we are not fulfilling the Great Commission by traversing the globe making converts. It is possible today for a person to go from the nursery to children's church to the youth group to the college campus ministry to small groups to the empty nesters to the golden oldies and never really to have been incorporated into the communion of saints. Genuine discipleship involves the older men and women teaching the younger members, people of different ethnicities and life experiences enriching each other's lives, rich and poor filling up what is lacking in mutual love and service. It is no wonder that young adults fail to join a church or embrace the responsibilities of belonging to the covenant assembly when their personal relationship with Jesus is contrasted with participation in the visible church with the public ministry that Christ has ordained.

### **E. The Lord's Supper**

Although it is not mentioned in the Great Commission, the Lord's Supper is included in the command to teach *everything* that Jesus Christ has delivered to his apostles. Jesus instituted the Supper in the upper room on the night before his crucifixion as a sacrament of continual incorporation into his sacrificial death and the blessings of the new covenant (Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20). The Supper visibly ratifies Christ's last will and testament toward all who receive it in faith. Repeating the words of institution, Paul wrote, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you..." (1 Cor. 11:23). In fact, so central is this celebration in the ordinary ministry that Paul could refer to it as the "coming together as a church" and upbraid the Corinthians for so corrupting the meal by division and scandal that he questioned whether the Supper was actually being celebrated (vv. 17-22). Against the chaos in the Corinthian church's worship—and in particular, the Lord's Supper—Paul reminds them that the Supper is Christ's means of binding the whole body together in him. At this table, socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural differences have no place. Being "in Christ" is the only niche demographic that matters. "The cup of blessing that we bless," says the apostle, "is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Along with the apostles' teaching, fellowship, and the prayers, "the breaking of bread" is included as an essential element of worship in the apostolic church (Acts 2:42).

Like these other elements, the celebration of the Supper is not merely a resource for personal piety, but a means through which the Spirit strengthens our faith and builds the whole body up together into Christ as its head. Preaching delivers the promise of the King and baptism and the

Supper are the seals attached to God's covenant pledge, assuring everyone who believes that they are co-heirs of Christ.

Beyond preaching and sacrament, our Lord's plan for making disciples includes "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). The Scriptures are sufficient for everything that we need for doctrine and life. Nothing is to be omitted and nothing is to be added. We need to hear this because even as Christians we delight in ignoring or marginalizing the clear teaching of Scripture to make room for our own imagination, creativity, and pragmatism. Disciples do not write up their own job description, but submit for their own advantage to the pastors and elders whom God has placed over them for their instruction and guidance (Matt. 16:19; 18:15-20; Ac 15 and 16; 1 Tim. 3-5; 2 Tim. 1-4; Tit. 1-3; Heb. 13:17; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; 5:1-14). Christ has not revealed a divinely ordained diet plan or a strategy for every detail of child-rearing or national economies. In such matters we have Christian liberty. However, he has clearly delivered a structure for order and offices in his church, along with the elements of worship that are central to the advance of the Great Commission.

#### **F. Making Disciples or Providing a Product?**

George Barna, an evangelical pioneer of church marketing, tells us: "Think of your church not as a religious meeting place, but as a service agency—an entity that exists to satisfy people's needs."<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, Barna has recently suggested that the institutional church is no longer relevant and should be replaced by informal gatherings for fellowship and Internet communities. In fact, he has introduced a new demographic: the "Revolutionaries," the "millions of believers" who "have moved beyond the established church and chosen to be the church instead."<sup>9</sup> The Revolutionaries have found that in order to pursue an authentic faith they had to abandon the church.<sup>10</sup> Intimate worship, says Barna, does "not require a 'worship service,'" just a personal commitment to the Bible, prayer, and discipleship.<sup>11</sup> Where Luke reports that the church gathered regularly "for the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers" (Acts 2:42-47), Barna suggests that preaching is simply "faith-based conversation" and the means of grace are no more than whatever it takes for "intentional spiritual growth," "love," "resource investment," and "spiritual friendships."<sup>12</sup>

Whereas a covenantal approach begins with God's Word and forms a communion of saints, in Barna's paradigm everything begins with the individual's personal decision, strengthened by

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<sup>8</sup> George Barna, *Marketing the Church* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 37

<sup>9</sup> George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Vibrant Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), back cover copy.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25

more personal disciplines, and ends with the abandonment of the visible church. God's ordained means of grace are replaced with whatever is calculated to facilitate our own means of commitment. "Scripture teaches us that devoting your life to loving God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul is what honors Him. Being part of a local church may facilitate that. Or it might not."<sup>13</sup> As the embodied communion of the saints is replaced by the Internet "explorer," the phrase "invisible church" takes on a new and ominous meaning. Yet it is part of a long history in which the public gathering of the covenant community for the means of grace was made subordinate to conventicles or "holy clubs." In the name of reaching the unchurched, evangelicalism increasingly tends to unchurch the church.

Like Finney, George Barna asserts that the Bible offers "almost no restrictions on structures and methods" for the church.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, for Barna, the visible church itself is of human rather than divine origin. Nature abhors a vacuum and where Barna imagines that the Bible prescribes no particular structures or methods, the invisible hand of the market fills the void. Barna recognizes that the shift from the institutional church to "alternative faith communities" is largely due to market forces to which he frankly insists we must conform.<sup>15</sup> The foretaste of heavenly catholicity surrenders to the powers of this present age in Barna's vision.<sup>16</sup> "So if you are a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 37

<sup>14</sup> George Barna, *Revolution*, 175

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 62-63. Following "the 'niching' of America" on the part of global marketing in the effort to "command greater loyalty (and profits)," we now have "churches designed for different generations, those offering divergent styles of worship music, congregations that emphasize ministries of interest to specialized populations, and so forth. The church landscape now offers these boutique churches alongside the something-for-everybody megachurches. In the religious marketplace, the churches that have suffered most are those who stuck with the one-size-fits-all approach, typically proving that one-size-fits-nobody."

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Barna's emphases are the logical outworking of a more general trend that drew much of its strength from the pioneering missiology of Donald McGavran. See his *Understanding Church Growth*, ed and rev. C. Peter Wagner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). Here he especially introduced the model of "homogeneous church growth" (163-175). C. Peter Wagner defends McGavran's approach in *Our Kind of People: The Ethical Dimensions of Church Growth in America* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979). However, some Reformed theologians in South Africa responded in the 1970s and '80s that this principle was precisely the church's justification for apartheid. Allan Boesak responded, "Manipulation of the word of God to suit culture, prejudices, or ideology is alien to the Reformed tradition." (*Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition*, ed. Leonard Sweetman [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984], 87). According to John de Gruchy, Reformed churches were not segregated until the "revivals in the mid-nineteenth century" by holiness preacher Andrew Murray and pietist missionaries. "It was under the dominance of such evangelicalism," says de Gruchy, "rather than the strict Calvinism of Dort, that the Dutch Reformed Church agreed at its Synod of 1857 that congregations could be divided along racial lines." He adds, "Despite the fact that this development went against earlier synodical decisions that segregation in the church was contrary to the Word of God, it was rationalized on grounds of missiology and practical necessity. Missiologically it was argued that people were best evangelized and best worshipped God in their own language and cultural setting, a position reinforced by German Lutheran missiology and somewhat akin to the church-growth philosophy of our own time" (*Liberating Reformed Theology: A South African Contribution to an Ecumenical Debate* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 23-24).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 70

Revolutionary,” Barna concludes, “it is because you have sensed and responded to God’s calling to be such an imitator of Christ. It is not a church’s responsibility to make you into this mold... The choice to become a Revolutionary—and it is a choice—is a covenant you make with God alone.”<sup>17</sup> Though he employs the word “covenant,” his assumptions are more suggestive of a contract: a consumer’s decision to accept certain terms in exchange for certain goods and services.

More recently, Barna and Frank Viola co-authored [\*Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices\*](#). As the title and subtitle suggest, this sweeping indictment dismisses public worship (including the sermon) along with “pastoral office” (136), and the Lord’s Supper is rejected as “a strange pagan-like rite” (197). In an earlier book, Viola insists that what we really need are “electric” events: “informal gatherings permeated with an atmosphere of freedom, spontaneity and joy,” “...open and participatory meetings” with “no fixed order of worship” and therefore “impromptu.”<sup>18</sup> In this setting, there is no place for “human officiation.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, “the Lord Jesus Christ” presides “invisibly” through every-member-ministry.<sup>20</sup>

## **G. The Marks and the Mission**

Less radically, many evangelicals today draw a sharp contrast between the marks of the church (preaching, sacrament, and discipline) and the mission of the church (evangelism, outreach, and service to the world). However, this is not really a new idea but a long-standing emphasis in evangelicalism. We often hear evangelists and pastors draw a contrast between “getting saved” and “joining a church.” However, as we see from Pentecost on in the Book of Acts, this contrast has no basis in Scripture. It is to the church, not to parachurch ministries, that Christ has entrusted the Great Commission. It is the church itself that comes into being through this ministry of Word and sacrament; it is the church that ministers these means of grace, and it is to the church that the Lord adds daily the number of those who are saved (Acts 2:47).

Often today, the ordinary ministry of preaching, baptizing, teaching, and sharing in the Lord’s Supper is separated from the mission of the church in the world. This is frequently posed in the form of a contrast between “going to church” and “being the church.” The church is not a place where certain things happen, we are told, but a people who do certain things.

Although it is often considered new and “emerging,” this dichotomy belongs to a long history in radical Protestantism, from Thomas Müntzer to representatives as varied as Charles Finney and Harvey Cox. As George Marsden has shown, the Second Great Awakening is in many respects

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<sup>18</sup> Frank Viola, *So You Want to Start a House Church? First Century Styled Church Planting for Today* (Jacksonville, FL: Present Testimony Ministry, 2003), 88. I am grateful to my colleague, Peter Jones, for pointing out these quotes in his review at Reformation21.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 234

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 234, 246

the common source of both Protestant liberalism and fundamentalism.<sup>22</sup> In *The Secular City* (1965), Cox wrote, “The insistence of the Reformers that the church was ‘where the word is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered’ will simply not do today.” Rather, he says, “the church appears” wherever “a new inclusive human community emerges” through social action.<sup>23</sup> It is increasingly common today to hear evangelicals shifting their focus from the uniqueness of Christ’s incarnation and redeeming work to talk about the church as a community of disciples extending Christ’s incarnation and his redeeming work in the world. Evangelicals have long spoken of “living the gospel,” as if our lives could be any more than an often ambiguous testimony to it.

According to Dan Kimball, for example, “We can’t go to church because *we are* the church.”<sup>24</sup> From this Kimball draws the familiar contrast between evangelism (mission) and the marks of the church (means of grace). Appealing to Darrell Guder’s *The Missional Church*, Kimball thinks that things went wrong at the Reformation.

The Reformers, in their effort to raise the authority of the Bible and ensure sound doctrine, defined the marks of a true church: a place where the gospel is rightly preached, the sacraments are rightly administered, and church discipline is exercised. However, over time these marks narrowed the definition of the church itself as a ‘place where’ instead of a ‘people who are’ reality. The word church became defined as ‘a place where certain things happen,’ such as preaching and communion.<sup>25</sup>

However, there are at least three problems with this increasingly widespread thesis. *First, it confuses the law and the gospel.* Unless the church is first of all a place where God judges and justifies the guilty, renewing them by his Word and Spirit, it cannot be a people who constitute anything more than another special interest group. Believers are called to do a great many things, but this is the third use of the law, not the gospel. The logic of the apostle in Romans 10 moves seamlessly from the content of the gospel (grace, Christ, and faith) to the means (hearing Christ proclaimed). Yet the oft-quoted line attributed to Francis of Assisi, “Always preach the gospel, and when necessary use words,” assumes that *we* are the Good News. Our good works bring glory to God and service to our neighbor. They flow from the gospel and adorn the gospel, but to suggest that they are in any way part of the gospel itself is a fatal confusion.

*Second, this view introduces a dilemma between the church’s essence and its mission that is not found in the New Testament.* There is not first of all a church assembling by its own decision and then certain things that the church does. Rather, the church itself comes into being, is sustained,

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<sup>22</sup> George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970)

<sup>23</sup> Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 145).

<sup>24</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Zondervan, 2003), 91

<sup>25</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church*, 93

and grows, through the same Word that it proclaims to the world. Wherever this gospel concerning Christ is proclaimed to sinners, and ratified in the sacraments, a fragile piece of this passing evil age becomes a theater for God's performance and the site of a mysterious intrusion of the powers of the age to come. In that precarious crevice between these two ages, a church is born, grows, and becomes an embassy of Christ's heavenly reign on earth. Christ himself instituted a visible new covenant assembly, delivering not only its message but its public rites and offices.

From the Great Commission and the Book of Acts, we hear of a kingdom that descends from heaven and expands to every nation precisely through the marks of preaching, sacrament, and discipline. There are many things besides these marks that identify a *healthy* church, such as the gifts of hospitality, generosity, administration, and service. However, all of these gifts are given and strengthened through the Word and the sacraments. Hence, a church that lacks *friendliness* is *unhealthy*, but a church that lacks the *Word* is *not a church*. And a church that is not missional is not faithfully proclaiming the Word, baptizing, and teaching all that Christ delivered, just as a church that is not faithful in executing these marks is not missional. We do not need a proliferation of marks (almost all of which shift the focus from God's action to our inner experience and activity), but to fulfill the Great Commission each week, delivering Christ to the sheep already gathered ("to you and your children") and "to those who are far off..." (Acts 2:39). Where confessional churches sometimes fail by losing their missional zeal "for all who are far off," revivalism creates a revolving door, as "you and your children" starve under a diet of often unscriptural imperatives abstracted from gospel indicatives.

*Third, this view confuses the church-as-gathered with the church-as-scattered.* Or, to put it differently, it tends to assimilate the visible church to the invisible church. We do not have to choose between the church as place and as people. Because it is first of all a place where God is at work, it becomes a people who leave the assembly as forgiven, renewed, and strengthened disciples who are prepared to love and serve their neighbors in the world. Of course, the church is not a building, but it *is* a public assembly where the Triune God is the primary actor. We are not the church merely as individuals and our private spiritual disciplines and moral activity are effects of grace, not the means of grace. Therefore, we must *go* to church if we are to *be* the church. The suggestion that we cannot go to church because we are the church invites the obvious question as to why we should participate regularly in church services at all. As George Barna has reminded us, resources for personal spirituality and social action may be found on any number of Internet sites. However, if the public service is the place where the Triune God is the playwright, central character, and casting director in the drama of redemption, then a new society emerges that participates even now in the powers of the age to come.

According to any number of surveys, the *lives* of professing Christians in the United States today do not differ from those of their non-Christian neighbors. Yet the surveys also indicate that there is little difference between the *beliefs* of Christians and non-Christians. If this is accurate, then the answer is not to abandon the church or to make it subordinate to parachurch efforts, but is to reform the church so that its ministry is more truly the means through which the Spirit creates forgiven, mature, and godly witnesses in the world. When the sheep are not fed by their shepherds on the Lord's Day but instead are called to become "self-feeders" who must find a ministry in the church, a double tragedy ensues. At the same time that they are immature in their

faith, they are also expected to be agents for transformation in the world—ironically, by signing up for more church-related ministries. The result is a church that is *of* the world, but not *in* it. By contrast, the reformers argued that in the formal gathering of the church, God serves his people through Word and sacrament, and they leave the assembly to fulfill their callings in the world. This is where their good works go: to their brothers and sisters, co-workers, family members, and neighbors who need them. God’s Word comes to us from outside of ourselves, outside of our ability to control it and make it an echo of our own felt needs and aspirations. And then as the Spirit wins our inward consent to its searching judgment and surprising promises, we are filled with love for our neighbors who need our vocations and witness.

### **3. The Promise: He Is With Us**

**“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).**

At the very moment that the disciples finally understood the point of Jesus’ journey to the cross and, through the cross, to the resurrection, he left. The first fruits of the harvest ascended bodily to the right hand of the Father. Yet he had already prepared him for his departure (John 14-16). He would not leave his people as orphans, but would send the promised Spirit to lead them into all truth, illuminating their hearts and minds to understand and to embrace everything that he had taught and empowering them to bring this witness to the ends of the earth. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment...” (John 16:7-8). Because Christ did ascend and send the Spirit, we today know Jesus Christ better even than the disciples before this event. The Spirit unites us to Christ, seating us with him in heavenly places, and through the ministry of Word and sacrament raises up from the valley of dry bones a mighty army of kingdom heirs.

Our Lord’s commission began with a triumphant indicative and now concludes with a triumphant promise. Lodged in the precarious crevice of his Word, where the powers of this present age are being assaulted by the power of the age to come, the church appears weak and foolish in the eyes of the world. It does not look like the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church that its Lord nevertheless says that it is. Jesus’ promise to be with his church to the end of the age is nothing like the pagan sentimentalism that speaks of loved ones as “still with us” through their spirits or memories. The Spirit whom Jesus promised is a person: the third person of the Trinity. Although Jesus is absent from us in the flesh, the Spirit unites us to the whole Christ in heaven by his mysterious grace.

It is not through confidence in its programs, strategies, achievements, or publicity, but through dependence on the Spirit and confidence in his Word that the church fulfills this Great Commission. So a renewed commitment to this mandate requires not only a deeper understanding of the gospel indicative that justifies it and a fuller appreciation for the means of grace that he has ordained for it; it also requires a more profound understanding of and dependence upon the person and work of the Spirit in this time between the ascension and return of Christ in the flesh.

According to sociologist Christian Smith, the dominant form of spirituality in America today is

what he calls “moralistic, therapeutic deism.” According to Smith’s studies, this is the default setting not only liberals and the unchurched, but people growing up in evangelical churches. Other studies have come to similar conclusions. Losing our confidence in the power of God’s Word to create the world of which it speaks, we place our confidence in more ostensibly relevant messages and more ostensibly effective means. However, the result has been not only an increasing failure to reach the lost, but a growing tendency to lose the reached. We place our hope in laws, principles, and programs: things that we do to ascend to pull God down to us, instead of in the gospel that is brought to us by a herald as completely counter-intuitive Good News.

In an interview with Billy Graham’s *Decision* magazine, C. S. Lewis was once asked “Do you feel, then, that modern culture is being de-Christianized?” Lewis responded:

“I cannot speak to the political aspects of the question, but I have some definite views about the de-Christianizing of the church. I believe that there are many accommodating preachers, and too many practitioners in the church who are not believers. Jesus Christ did not say, ‘Go into all the world and tell the world that it is quite right.’ The Gospel is something completely different. In fact, it is directly opposed to the world.”<sup>26</sup>

“Self-salvation is the goal of much of our preaching,” according to United Methodist bishop William Willimon.<sup>27</sup> Willimon perceives that much of contemporary preaching, whether mainline or evangelical, assumes that conversion is something that we generate through our own words and sacraments. “In this respect we are heirs of Charles G. Finney,” who thought that conversion was not a miracle but a “purely philosophical [i.e., scientific] result of the right use of the constituted means.”

[W]e have forgotten that there was once a time when evangelists were forced to defend their ‘new measures’ for revivals, that there was once a time when preachers had to defend their preoccupation with listener response to their Calvinist detractors who thought that the gospel was more important than its listeners. I am here arguing that revivals are miraculous, that the gospel is so odd, so against the grain of our natural inclinations and the infatuations of our culture, that nothing less than a miracle is required in order for there to be true hearing.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, “The homiletical future, alas, lay with Finney rather than Edwards.” “Alas,” adds Willimon, “most ‘evangelistic’ preaching I know about is an effort to drag people even deeper into their subjectivity rather than an attempt to rescue them from it.”<sup>29</sup> Willimon observes that our real problem, whether we feel it or not, is that we systematically distort and ignore the truth.

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<sup>26</sup> The interview with Sherwood Wirt in *Decision* magazine is included in C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Eerdmans, 1970), 265

<sup>27</sup> William Willimon

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 20

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

This is why we need “an external word.”<sup>30</sup> “So in a sense, we don’t discover the gospel, it discovers us. ‘You did not choose me but I chose you’ (John 15:16).”<sup>31</sup> Willimon concludes, “The story is *euangelion*, *good news*, because it is about grace. Yet it is also news because it is not common knowledge, not what nine out of ten average Americans already know. Gospel doesn’t come naturally. It comes as Jesus.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 52