
THE GREAT COMMISSION IN STEREO: THE MISSIONAL SUPREMACY OF MAKING DISCIPLES

OVERVIEW

- I. The Multiplicity of Martyrs
- II. The Multiplicity of Gospel Writers
- III. The Multiplicity of Great Commissions
- IV. The Multiplicity of Great Commission Challenges Today
- V. The Multiplicity of Great Commission Dimensions

I. THE MULTIPLICITY OF MARTYRS

A. Passing the Great Commission Baton

1. Attempting to fulfill the Great Commission in their day was deadly for the Apostles. Yet history tells us that they prized faithfulness to that commission above their own lives and well-being. Moreover, they sought to help other believers reframe their kingdom trials as they themselves had done: “It has been *granted* to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (Phil 1:29-30).
2. What kind of suffering could be regarded as a gift? What kind of single-minded focus could eclipse all other interests and pursuits under the sun? What kind of life purpose could be loftier than life itself? For the Apostles, only one thing could command such radical devotion—**the gospel and its worldwide success**. When Paul sought to “pass the baton” of his Great Commission passion to his young disciple, Timothy, he wrote in 2 Timothy 4:1-8:

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: ² Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. ³ For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴ They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, **do the work of an evangelist** [*euangelistēs*, “a gospelizer”], discharge all the duties of your ministry.

⁶ For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure. ⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the

righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.

Shortly thereafter, Paul’s tongue and pen were silenced. Yet his worldwide influence remains to this day.

B. The Phenomenon of Apostolic Martyrdom

1. The martyrdom of some Apostles is more established than others, as historians have different degrees of certainty concerning the circumstances of their deaths. For example, most historians would not take issue with the credibility of the martyrdom of Peter, Paul, or James. Accounts for other Apostles likewise have much historical credibility. Some apostolic martyr traditions, however, lack definitive support.
2. Still, it is widely accepted that **all but one of the Apostles died a martyr’s death**, even if we can’t be sure of all of the details in every case. Amidst some uncertainty, one thing is clear—the reason given for their death was the same in every account. They were killed because they claimed to have seen Christ risen from the dead. The Apostles all died because of an unwavering, unrelenting claim that “Jesus is Lord” because he rose again from the dead in bodily form. In short, they died for Easter.
3. In that sense, **the gruesome deaths of the Apostles are a gift to the church**. They contribute much to an overall apologetic by answering the “How do you know?” question concerning the central tenant of Christianity—viz., the resurrection of Jesus. People will often die for what they believe to be true (wrong though their beliefs may be; e.g., the 9/11 bombers), but they will almost *never* die for what they know to be false. **When the choice is between your life and your lie, your life will win every time.**
4. Had the Apostles known the resurrection to be a falsehood, at least one of them surely would have “come clean” at some point. Instead, history tells us that all of them maintained their belief in the resurrection up to and including the moment of their execution. That none of them recanted argues convincingly that the resurrection was no fabrication to them. **They were witnesses to the risen Christ, and they could not un-see what they had seen. Nor could they recant, for that would have been the lie.**

C. In summary, the martyrs’ roll call is as follows:

- **Stephen**
Stoned to death by the Sanhedrin right outside Jerusalem in 35 AD
- **James, the son of Zebedee**
Beheaded by Herod Agrippa for preaching in the Temple in 45 AD
- **Phillip**
Flogged and crucified in Phrygia in 54 AD

- **James, the brother of Jesus**
Thrown from Herod's temple, and then clubbed to death in 62 AD
- **Peter**
Crucified upside down in Rome in 64 AD
- **Matthew**
Beheaded in Ethiopia in 65 AD
- **Paul**
Beheaded in Rome in 67 AD
- **Mark**
Dragged to death through the streets of Alexandria with a rope around his neck in 68 AD
- **Andrew**
Crucified on an X-shaped cross in Greece in 70 AD
- **Thomas**
Tortured and speared to death by an angry mob in India in 70 AD
- **Nathanael**
Skinned alive and crucified upside down in Armenia in 70 AD
- **Matthais**
Stoned while being crucified in Ethiopia in 70 AD
- **James, the son of Alphaeus**
Crucified in Lower Egypt in 71 AD for preaching the gospel
- **Thaddeus**
Beaten with sticks by an angry mob in Persia in 72 AD
- **Simon the Zealot**
Crucified by the governor of Syria in 74 AD
- **John**
Boiled in hot oil yet survived, only to be exiled to Patmos near the end of the 1st century

How could they do it? How could all of them die like they did? The martyrs' mindset is captured well by Paul's testimony in Philippians 3:7-11:

⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. ¹⁰ **I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,** ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

The martyrs' mindset may seem unrealistic and unattainable in our day, but it is important to keep in mind that: (a) God gives extraordinary grace where it is needed; and (b) God gives extraordinary assignments to ordinary people. This is to his glory, and is seen, in part, in the multiplicity of Gospel writers.

II. THE MULTIPLICITY OF GOSPEL WRITERS

A. Some Profound Implications from Simple Observations

1. There are four Gospel writers and four Great Commissions (five if the Commission in Acts is included). Yet these commissions are different from each other. One must ask, then, why did the evangelists all record the Great Commission differently? Is this an example of the “synoptic problem,” or is there some other dynamic at work here?
2. It is possible that Jesus gave the Great Commission many times and in many ways, and that each author heard all (or most) of these sayings. The Gospel writers perhaps resonated with one particular form of the commission more than the others based upon how God uniquely wired them. They then latched on to one version of the commission, owned it, and recorded it for the church. Without *changing* the truth, they *applied* the truth in keeping with how they wrote their Gospel. The result is that we get “**the Great Commission in stereo.**”
3. The simple observation that there is a multiplicity of Gospel writers and a multiplicity of Great Commissions can serve to neutralize the notion that there is one *right* way to do evangelism. God uniquely created his people to fulfill the unique purpose he has for each of them.
4. If preaching can be viewed as “truth through personality” (Phillips Brooks), then evangelism can be viewed as “**gospel through personality**” (TRV).

B. How “gospel through personality” gives us the Great Commission in stereo

Discuss: Briefly describe the purpose and personality of each Gospel and Gospel writer:

1. Matthew
2. Mark
3. Luke
4. John

Discuss: How might these different purposes and personalities give us a broader view and fuller understanding of the Great Commission?

III. THE MULTIPLICITY OF GREAT COMMISSIONS

A. Getting the Fuller Picture

If our understanding of the Great Commission is dominated by one saying (e.g., Mark's version) or by one phrase (e.g., "teaching them to obey" in Matthew's version), we may wind up with a distorted understanding of the mission of the church. For a fuller picture, look at the Great Commission in all four Gospels and Acts.

Note: For an even fuller picture of the mission of the church, consult Christopher J. H. Wright's *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

Wright argues that the entire Bible is generated by and all about God's mission. In order to understand the Bible, we need a missional hermeneutic, an interpretive perspective in tune with this great missional theme. This perspective provides a solid and expansive basis for holistic mission. God's mission is to reclaim the world—including the created order—and God's people have a designated role to play.

B. The Great Commission in Stereo

Read through the five Great Commissions (and "sub-Commissions"), noting some points of comparison and contrast:

1. **Matthew 28:16-20**

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 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."

Matthew 4:18-20

¹⁸ As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁹ "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." ²⁰ At once they left their nets and followed him.

2. **Mark 16:14-20**

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.

Mark 1:16-18

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.” ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

3. Luke 24:45-53

⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.

Luke 5:10-11

¹⁰ Then Jesus said to Simon, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you will catch men.” ¹¹ So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.

4. John 20:19-23

¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”

John 17:15-18

¹⁵ My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. ¹⁷ Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.

5. Acts 1:8-9

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.” ⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

Acts 28:31

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” the Lord replied.¹⁶
 “Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.¹⁷ I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them¹⁸ to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”

C. Points of Comparison and Contrast

Discuss: Briefly note some points of comparison and contrast among the five commissions. Why might these points be significant and/or helpful?

1. Points of Comparison
2. Points of Contrast

D. Impact

Implementing the Great Commission in their day, the early Christians “**turned the world upside down**” (Acts 17:6). Cf. handout, “The Gospel in the Roman Empire.”

IV. THE MULTIPLICITY OF GREAT COMMISSION CHALLENGES TODAY

A. A Time of Exponential Change

1. **Globalization** can be understood as the rapid social, economic, political, and technological changes that have increased *interaction* and *interdependence* among people in diverse locations around the globe.
2. In large measure the **instantaneous exchange of information** through electronic media has been the fuel of globalization.
 - a. The amount of digital information generated in our day is nothing short of staggering. At the mid-point of 2018, more than 7 billion humans were using the internet. That’s a growth of 7.5 percent over 2016. Moreover, 90 percent of the data in the world today has been created in the last two years alone.
 - b. On average, Google now processes more than 40,000 searches every second (= 3.5 billion searches per day). While 77 percent of all searches are conducted on Google, other search engines also contribute to the daily data generation. Worldwide there are approximately 5 billion searches every day.

- c. Beyond simple internet searches, the digital data generated by individual users is skyrocketing exponentially. **Here is what happened on the internet every minute in 2017:**
- Device users sent 174,000,000 emails.
 - Marketers sent 103,447,520 spam emails.
 - Twitter users posted 456,000 tweets.
 - Facebook users posted 803,000 statuses and comments.
 - Smart Phone users sent 15,220,700 texts.
 - Google conducted 3,607,080 searches.
 - BuzzFeed users viewed 50,926 videos.
 - YouTube users watched 4,146,600 videos.
 - Netflix users streamed 69,444 hours of video.
 - Instagram users posted 46,700 photos.
 - Facebook users posted 136,000 photos.
 - Snapchat users shared 527,760 photos.
 - Skype users made 154,200 video calls.
 - Tumblr users made 74,220 posts.
 - Amazon made \$258,752 in sales.
 - Uber riders took 45,788 rides.
 - Weather Channel received 18,055,556 forecast requests.
 - LinkedIn gained 120 new professionals.
 - Spotify added 13 new songs.
 - Wikipedia published 600 new pages.
 - Americans used 2,657,700 GB of data. ***Every minute!***
- d. All told, human beings are producing 2.5 quintillion (10^{18}) bytes of data every day. That's 2,500,000 Terabytes or 2,500,000,000 Gigabytes of data—***every single day!***
- b. By some calculations (e.g., UC Berkley) this amount is roughly equivalent to the amount of data present in 250,000 Libraries of Congress.

B. What Does This Have to Do with Us?

1. **Herbert Simon**, Nobel Laureate in Economics, wrote in 1969, “What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes *the attention* of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.”
2. Commenting on Simon’s words, **Philip Meyer**, Knight Professor of Journalism at UNC at Chapel Hill, wrote, “This poverty of attention forces the attention industries (journalism, entertainment, public relations, advertising) to do wilder and stranger things” to successfully compete with one another.
3. Since the tool of the church is the gospel—which is, in large part, *information; a message*—we find ourselves competing for the attention of our communities. In whatever culture we work, **we are only one of many voices seeking to be heard**. Consequently, many churches feel the need to do “wilder and stranger things” to capture attention.

4. For centuries, the public face of Christianity has been the local church and the Sunday morning worship service in a church building. In a sense we have said to our communities, **“If you would be a follower of Christ, you must come to this building on this day of the week and participate in the events taking place here.”** It is time for us to ask two significant questions:
 - a. Is that the message we want to communicate?
 - b. If not, what message do we want to communicate?
5. Whatever our message is, it must now compete with 2.5 billion GB of information every day. **Two things will get their attention:**
 - a. A message that is different and significant
 - b. A medium that is authentic and personal
6. Globalization is changing the world so quickly that we will not be able to develop enough effective ministry strategies to keep pace with it. That is why some have argued that **we must return to the primitive and universal roots of the Great Commission.** The Great Commission has both attention ingredients:
 - a. The message of the Great Commission (the gospel) is different and significant.
 - b. The medium of the Great Commission (Spirit-transformed followers of Christ) is authentic and personal.
7. Discipleship effectiveness in this generation will require the prioritization of the missional, theological, and practical supremacy of the Great Commission.

V. THE MULTIPLICITY OF GREAT COMMISSION DIMENSIONS

- A. Before he left his disciples, Jesus told them what he wanted them to do (i.e., the Great Commission).
- B. The missional supremacy of the Great Commission comes from three significant contexts.
 1. The first context is the resurrection.
 2. The second context is Christ’s supreme authority over all things.
 3. The third context is its apostolic designation.
- C. The Great Commission has been historically and universally accepted as the most comprehensive statement in the Scriptures concerning the mission of the church. It is both a privilege and a command.
 1. “Any church that is not seriously involved in helping fulfill the Great Commission has forfeited its biblical right to exist.” (Oswald J. Smith)

2. The missional supremacy of the Great Commission demands that we give it our attention, obedience, energy, and resolve. It is not another program, method, strategy, formula, or idea to add to our ministry. It should *be* our ministry. This does not preclude other activities in the life of the church (e.g., worship, counseling, visitation, hospitality, mercy, justice, etc.), it means that these other activities should be **utilized in service of the Great Commission.**
- D. The Great Commission in Matthew contains one verb and three participles:
1. *Matheteuo* (“to make a disciple”) = the verb
 2. The words “go,” “baptize,” and “teach” = the participles
 3. A simple understanding of how Greek grammar works in Matthew’s gospel will not allow us to say (as is often incorrectly claimed) that the verb is the central focus, while the participles carry secondary emphasis. On the contrary, **even the participles in a sentence like this can have imperatival force** (cf. Dr. Robert Plummer).
 4. A better way to understand the passage, then, is to see that the verb tells us *what* to do, while the participles tell us *how* to do it. **We make disciples *by going, by baptizing, and by teaching.***
 - Go—bring people to Christ (evangelism)
 - Baptize—bring people into the church (community)
 - Teach—bring people to spiritual maturity (obedience)
 5. The Verb: *Matheteuo* (“Make Disciples”)
 - An imperative
 - Implies intentionality
 - Action oriented; not passive
 6. *Mathētes*—a disciple, a follower, a learner.

“Making” indicates a process of spiritual formation involving:

 - Transformation (thinking, beliefs, worldview)
 - Character development (growth in grace)
 - Behavioral change (a grace-inspired ethic)
 7. **Discipleship is “learning by hearing, following, and doing.”** In a rabbinic sense, it is following your master close enough that the dust of his sandals kicks up onto you.
 8. **Michael J. Wilkins:** “A disciple was a person who was committed to a significant master. Hence, in the Christian sense, a disciple of Jesus is one who has come to him for eternal life, has claimed him as savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following him Discipleship mean[s] living a fully human life in this world in unique union with Jesus Christ and growing in conformity to his image.”

9. My concise definition: **A disciple is a Spirit-transforming follower of Christ who is conforming to his image and making other disciples.** *You have not made a disciple until your disciple has made a disciple!*
10. The word “disciple” is used most frequently in the Gospels (230 times) and in Acts (28 times).

E. Some Poor Models of Discipleship

1. Disciples are merely learners (i.e., a cognitive focus only).
2. All believers are disciples regardless of lifestyle (i.e., ethics are unrelated to doctrinal catechism).
3. Evangelism produces converts; discipleship is separate, optional, and can come later for those who want to go “deeper.”
4. Disciples are ministers or “super-Christians” (i.e., salvation is for all who believe, but discipleship is for a few deeply committed and consecrated believers).

F. The Power of Multiplication

1. If the population of China (1.4 billion people) walked past you in a line single file, the line would never end because of the multiplying birth rate!
2. If an exceptionally gifted evangelistic ministry averaged winning 1,000 souls to Christ every day, it would take that ministry 16,438 years to win the world to Christ if there were no additional babies born and no deaths (there are over 200,000 more births than deaths each *day*).
3. If you were a gifted, powerful and famous evangelist, and you filled a stadium every day with 50,000 unbelievers, and they all received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior as a result of your preaching, it would take you over 356 *years* to win the whole world to Christ (and that would be only if no new babies were born during that time)!
5. The Evangelistic Potential of One-on-One Discipleship:

Year	Evangelist (1 per Day)	Discipler (1 per Year)
1	365	2
2	730	4
3	1095	8
4	1460	16
5	1825	32
10	3650	1024
20	7300	1,048,576
30	10950	1,073,741,824
33	12045	8,589,924,592

- In 33 years, the world would be discipled.

- Maybe it is time to think “smaller”—not larger—when it comes to discipleship.
- “He who does the work is not so profitably employed as he who multiplies the doers.”
- These illustrations—fanciful though they may be—highlight the potential inherent in a multiplied approach to ministry as we focus on the multiplication of disciples.

CONCLUSION

- A. The work of God in our day is to make his name known throughout all creation so that persons from every tribe, tongue, ethnicity, and nation might know his saving grace.
- B. Is the Great Commission your vision? Beyond loving him with all that we are, and loving our neighbors as ourselves, God has given us one primary thing to do: “make disciples of all the nations.” Do your ministries and lifestyle reflect this?
- C. A Final Thought: “There has been a long tradition which sees the mission of the Church primarily as obedience to a command. It has been customary to speak of ‘the missionary mandate.’ This way of putting the matter is certainly not without justification, and yet it seems to me that it misses the point. **It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel. If one looks at the New Testament evidence one gets another impression. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy.** The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving.”

- Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, p. 116