

God's Heart for Missions:
A Biblical Theology of the Great Commission

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According to Matthew 28:18b-20, Jesus gives what has been traditionally called the Great Commission to his Disciples. Here he states, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."¹ This is said to be the commission which the Disciples take up, and that which launches the New Testament church, witnessed in the pages of the Acts of the Apostles and is continued in the work of the Apostles and their associates throughout the rest of the NT until today. In short, this Great Commission endeavor has been called "missions."

It has been said that "missions" is God's heart.² If this statement can be proven biblically, it must also then be more than a New Testament ideal because God is immutable.³ This paper will seek to evaluate the Great Commission from a Biblical Theology perspective, and assess if its outworking for the New Testament church flows from an overarching development of God's reconciliatory work as part of His unchanging character. Furthermore, this valuation will attempt to observe whether

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this paper are to the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016).

² A quick Google search reveals this is a common theme. Two examples: "The Heart of God / A Heart of Mission" by Mary Fisher, <https://urbana.org/blog/heart-god-heart-mission>, and "Mission: God's Heart for the World," a Bible study guide by Paul Borthwick, outlined here: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/m/mission-gods-heart-for-world.html>

³ It will be assumed by this author that the case for such a theological stance does not have to be proven previously to work out such a presupposition within the context of this paper.

this commission, as stated by Jesus in the Gospels, is passed down from the Disciples to the New Testament church as the means of furthering the reconciliatory work of God until Christ returns.

The Reconciliatory Work of God

From the earliest pages of Scripture, we see that YHWH is a relational Deity. He makes man in His image and forges a relationship that is communicable and perfect (Gen 1:26). YHWH communicates His relationship with mankind through what He mandates of him (Gen. 1:28), and by what He has given him (Gen. 1:29). YHWH communicates to Adam a covenant in which his relationship to God can be broken, if he eats of what he has been told not to eat (Gen. 2:17). It is presumed that this relationship can be characterized as worshipful, but personal, in that what seems normal is that mankind is used to God walking with them in the Garden (Gen. 3:8).

It is in the context of this relationship, that mankind falls, being deceived by the serpent, breaking God's command, and as a result, also his relationship with God as it was. But hope (a reconciliatory hope) is established when YHWH speaks of a "seed" that will have his heel bruised by the serpent, but whose heel will crush the head of that deceiver (Gen. 3:15)! This promise is the beginning of the work of YHWH in reconciling mankind to himself.

Walt Kaiser argues that the beginning of missions is indeed found within the opening chapters of Genesis. He states, "Genesis begins in the first eleven chapters with a focus on all the families and nations of the earth much before one family [Israel] is called to serve all the other families of the earth."⁴ He also submits that "[r]ight from the beginning of the canon there is more than just a passing concern that all the nations of the earth should come to believe in the coming Man of Promise, the One who would appear through the Seed of the woman Eve, through the family of Shem, and then through the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David."⁵ Similarly, Scobie states that "[although] the salvation/judgement history that occupies a great deal of the OT is mainly concerned with God's dealings with Israel, God's concern for all

⁴ Walt Kaiser, "The Great Commission in the Old Testament." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13 (January 1996): 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

the nations never drops out of sight."⁶ J.H. Bavinck concurs, and further sees a fully biblical theology of missions from beginning to end.⁷ But to what degree can this be seen as the beginnings of so-called "missions"? Or to what degree may one see the so-called "Great Commission" in effect from these earliest pages of the Torah? If this is able to be seen, to what lengths is the "Great Commission" able to be traced throughout the whole canon? These questions need to be answered in light of examining the commission itself.

Examining the Great Commission

After Christ is raised from the dead, He meets with His men and gives them what has been called the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18b-20, Luke 24:44-49, [cf. Acts 1:8]). The Lord himself does not give it this title, but the title does seem to capture the nature of the charge given. To examine the commission properly, a brief survey of the pertinent passages should be made.

The Context of the Great Commission

The Great Commission is set at the end of Matthew's gospel after Jesus has been raised and Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are told by the angel to go and tell His disciples that He has been raised and to wait for Him in Galilee (Matthew 28:1-8). Jesus himself comes to them and tells them the same thing (Matthew 28:9-10). It is within the context of Jesus meeting them in Galilee that He gives them the commission.

The Lucan account is also set at the end of his gospel and is

⁶ Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, First Edition, First Printing edition. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 510. Others have also argued for this view of God's reconciliatory work toward the nations. William Carver states, "The origin of missions is ultimately to be found in the heart of God...This attitude of God is eternal and is determinative in all His dealing with men." William Owen Carver, *Missions in the Plan of the Ages: Bible Studies in Missions* (New York, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), 12-13.

⁷ Bavinck states, "[I]f we investigate the Old Testament more thoroughly, it becomes clear that the future of the nations is a point of greatest concern...for from the first page to the last the Bible has the whole world in view, and its divine plan of salvation is unfolded as pertaining to the world," J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1993), 11.

introduced to the eleven when Jesus appears among them and others who are with them, and tells them that these are the things that he had told them must be fulfilled from the Law and the Prophets (Luke 24:36-49).

Elements of the Great Commission from Matthew

The first element to notice within the commission is the authority Jesus announces. Christ states, “ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῶ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς” (all power has been given to me in heaven and in [the] earth).⁸ Therefore, the first part of the commission is to assure the disciples that Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth. This seems to be for their benefit, their assurance. James Boice succinctly states that in its context Jesus’ statement is one that is in concert with Ephesians 6:12, so that the disciples understand it to be an authority that is “over all other authorities... [his] resurrection proves his authority over any power that can possibly be imagined. Consequently, we do not fear Satan or anyone else while we are engaged in Jesus’ service.”⁹

The elements that follow are the command itself, and though one command, there are three elements, plus another statement of assurance. It has been argued that the foundational element is the phrase “μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη” (you make disciples of all nations/ethnicities).¹⁰ Furthering the argument of the foundational element being this phrase, it is more particularly argued that the verb μαθητεύσατε is the core of that foundation, “you make disciples.”¹¹ This of course is not to discount the rest of the command as unimportant. David Croteau makes the important observation, that to imply that we

⁸ Author’s translation. Kurt Aland, Barbara Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger. *Novum Testamentum Graece*. 28th Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), Mt. 28:18. There are textual variants and later additions, but they have negligible impact to the meaning of the text.

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew: The Triumph of the King: Matthew 18-28* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 647.

¹⁰ Author’s translation. NA28, Mt. 28:19. There are textual variants, but they have negligible impact to the meaning of the text.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark,*

Luke, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 595.

are not to “go” because “making disciples” is the core it to misunderstand the intent of Christ here. It is properly understood as “as you are going.”¹² In other words, this should be way of life for the disciples to whom Jesus is speaking. The means of accomplishing this are through baptizing and teaching. The baptism formula that Jesus gives is “βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος” (baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit).¹³ The teaching formula Jesus gives is “διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην ὑμῖν” (teaching them to observe all which I have commanded you).¹⁴ As a sort of *inclusio*, just as Jesus had said that He had been given authority before he issues the command, afterward He tells them “καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος” (and behold, I myself will be with you all the days, even to the end of the age).¹⁵ The authority with which He sends them, will be the same authority which is with them to the end.

Elements from the Great Commission in Luke.

Luke’s account seems to summarize several aspects of the end of Jesus’ earthly ministry, and so the commission given is shortened as well. In fact, the commission is fitted within the context of Jesus explaining how all that He has told them in his earthly ministry, is being fulfilled. The commission itself is captured in the phrase κηρυχθῆναι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ μετάνοιαν εἰς ἄφεςιν ἁμαρτιῶν εἰς πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἀρξάμενοι ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλὴμ (proclaim in his [Jesus’] name repentance for the forgiveness of sin for all peoples beginning from Jerusalem).¹⁶ This account gives the added feature of repentance, which is a theme of Jesus’ preaching in the Synoptics and which could be assumed in the Matthean account by the outward act of Baptism.¹⁷ The aspect of making

¹² David A. Croteau, *Urban Legends of the New Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015) Kindle Edition, Location 1774.

¹³ Author’s translation. NA28, Mt. 28:19. There are textual variants, but they have negligible impact to the meaning of the text.

¹⁴ Author’s translation, *Ibid.*, Mt 28:20.

¹⁵ Author’s translation, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Author’s translation, *Ibid.*, Lk 24:47.

¹⁷ This is seen in the account of Peter’s preaching where, when the men who are convicted by his preaching ask him what they must do. Peter tells them they

disciples of all the nations could also be seen in the language of Jesus' name being proclaimed to the nations. The elements of both of these passages are clear, and are directed at those who stand with Jesus just before his ascension. The question to be explored in this paper is in what sense is this related to God's reconciliatory work throughout the canon?

Elements of the Great Commission in the Old Testament

Beginning with the first element shown previously, in what way is the authority of YHWH in reconciliatory work shown? This author would submit that it is seen in the promise of Genesis 3:15 in which, though there is a curse being pronounced, a promise is included. Kaiser raises the point that beyond just the curse motif in Genesis 3:15 "[there is] a sudden turn of events, God predicted that the Serpent would bruise the heel of one woman's 'seed,' a male descendant from among her offspring...[m]ost surprising of all, however, the male child of the woman's 'seed' would strike back [a lethal blow], striking the head of the serpent."¹⁸ Sailhamer sees this statement of two seeds as that of a power struggle. The dominant one in this struggle is seen as the seed of the woman.¹⁹ Though it would seem obvious that God is the authority in this scenario, the author of the Pentateuch sets out to build this case. How does one know that God is authoritative? It is through the special revelation of Himself through His Word. Herman Bavinck states, "[i]n revelation God becomes knowable."²⁰ It is by special revelation that God makes Himself known. The sovereignty and authority of God is put on display in the earliest chapters of God's revelation of Himself, namely in creation. Therefore, God's authority to reconcile man by His means is also seen in the earliest chapters by way of the promised seed of Gen. 3:15. "[I]n the midst of the dirge of gloom and rebuke came God's

must "[r]epent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The command to repent inwardly is tied to the outward sign of baptism.

¹⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations*, 2 edition. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 2-3.

¹⁹ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 107-108.

²⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 341-342.

surprising word of prophetic hope."²¹

Looking at the second element, the question is, in what way, as they were going, were OT saints "making disciples?" Is this a valid mission of the OT people of God? Kaiser again is helpful in stating that "[t]he message of the O.T. was/is both universal in its scope and international in its range. This is clear right from the start in Genesis 1-11 with its universal audience. It also is very clear from the fact that when God first called Abraham to be his chosen instrument, the Living God gave the first great commission to him."²² Sailhamer agrees that "Abraham is represented here as a new Adam and the 'seed of Abraham' as a second Adam, a new humanity," the seed by which all the "families of the earth' are to be blessed."²³ Is this the equivalent of "making disciples?" The basest meaning of disciple is a learner. The word for disciple (μαθητανω), is not found in the LXX. However, the concept that Israel was to teach the nations about God is found within the context of the OT. There are implications of this in understanding God's covenant with Abraham, and the promise that the nation which would come from him would be a blessing to the world. But also, as Michael Grisanti states regarding the Mosaic covenant, "[b]y conducting their lives in conformity with the demands of the Law, the nation of Israel would have been able to function as God's servant nation, representing God and His character before the surrounding nations of the world."²⁴ This is highlighted in the distinctive way in which Israel is to live in light of the nations around them (Lev. 18:24-30). In this way, there is instruction about who YHWH is.

This is demonstrated in Rahab's response to finding out that the men of Israel are on their way to Jericho and she relays that the Canaanite's heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to

²¹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 43.

²² Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Great Commission in the Old Testament." *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 13 (January 1996): 3.

²³ Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 139-140.

²⁴ Michael A. Grisanti, "Israel's Mission To The Nations In Isaiah 40-55: An Update," *Master's Seminary Journal* 9, no. 1 (1998): 40.

destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath (Joshua 2:10-11).

Here there is seen a particular way in which the nations come to know something about YHWH which sets him apart from the gods of the nations. Rahab uses the proper name of YHWH (as signified in English by "LORD"), and acknowledges the personal nature by the possessive, "your God." The testimony of YHWH comes with Israel and this is seen not only in the power of YHWH demonstrated in the supernatural occurrences, but also in the way Israel represents Him as they follow in obedience.

Grisanti further points out that though the nations are to fear YHWH, His word to Isaiah is that they would not only understand who He is, but also repent: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn; from my mouth has gone out in righteousness a word that shall not return: "To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance" (Is. 45:22-23). However, the question which Grisanti addresses is, what active role, if any, does Israel play in this? He shows that this is part of a larger debate concerning whether Israel is a missionary to the nations (externally calling the nations to YHWH) or if Isaiah's goal is to call Israel back to YHWH himself (internal repentance for the nation itself). Grisanti concludes that either of these positions are extremes, and that the prophet Isaiah neither depicts Israel as a nation of world-traversing missionaries, nor does he exclude the nations from participation in divine redemption. Consonant with relevant antecedent Scriptures, the prophet argues that God's special dealings with His chosen people not only benefit Israel, but also carry significance for all nations. Isaiah underscores Israel's role in providing a witness to the nations.²⁵

However, he also concludes that this is not equivalent to NT missionary endeavors, but simply a way for the nations to raise inquests regarding YHWH.²⁶ It is this author's opinion that though Grisanti may be right, the element of teaching the nations about YHWH is still applicable to Israel. This would seem to combine the idea of making disciples and teaching into the same element of the Great Commission.

²⁵ Ibid., 61.

²⁶ Ibid.

Another element of making disciples in the Great Commission is baptizing. For the NT believer, baptism is the external initiation rite that symbolizes one's identity with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. But, as Peter commands that those who desire to be saved must repent and be baptized, it also seems to capture the symbolism of the converts sins being washed away.²⁷ Is there a sense in which either of these can be paralleled in the OT?

Concerning identity, Presbyterian covenant theology equates NT baptism with OT circumcision. Louis Berkhof, writing from this perspective states, "By the appointment of God infants shared in the benefits of the covenant, and therefore received circumcision as a sign and seal."²⁸ Because Presbyterian Covenantalism sees a strict continuity between the Abrahamic and the New Covenant, their view is that the baptism of infants correlates to OT circumcision as the means of communicating covenant status for children.²⁹ This author does not disagree that there may be a correlation between OT circumcision and NT baptism, but that if the physical sign is given to those born under the Abrahamic Covenant, could it not be seen that the sign and seal given in the New Covenant, which is a spiritual covenant, is related to a spiritual new birth? Jeffrey Johnson proposes that Presbyterian Covenant Theologians "combine the physical and outward aspects of the nation of Israel with the spiritual Kingdom of God—the church. By meshing these two covenants, they mix infant circumcision—the sign of being born into a physical nation, with water baptism—the sign of being born into a spiritual nation."³⁰ This disagreement aside, the point still stands, that in part, circumcision was to set Israel apart from the nations surrounding her³¹ and it was a sign and seal of the Abrahamic covenant. All who were born into Israel were to have the sign, and all who were proselytized were

²⁷ Due to the nature and scope of this paper, an attempt will not be made to argue for credobaptism; the position will be assumed.

²⁸ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 633.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Fatal Flaw: The Fatal Flaw of the Theology Behind Infant Baptism* (Conway: Free Grace Press, 2017, Kindle Edition), Locations 3391-3393.

³¹ The terminology of circumcised and uncircumcised becomes a language of distinction in the OT (e.g. Gen. 34).

to be given the sign.³² So those who would learn about Israel, would also learn through the means of circumcision that Israel's God was distinct from their gods.

Another way in which a baptism is imagined is through the Noahic flood. In his first epistle, Peter writes:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,¹⁹ in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison,²⁰ because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him (1 Pet 3:18-22).

In what sense does baptism correlate to Noah and his family being brought safely through the flood? Karen Jobes submits, "The very water that threatened to kill Noah and his family was at the same time the means of their deliverance."³³ As Edwin Blum states, "Baptism is the 'copy,' the 'representation,' or even the 'Fulfilment' of the OT deliverance from judgment."³⁴ Within the context of 1 Peter, baptism is represented as a means of having an "appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Peter seems to suggest that baptism symbolizes resurrection life. Noah and his family were "saved" through water, though in reality God saved them by providing the way. So too, the believer of the NT era is "saved" through the resurrection of Jesus as symbolized in water baptism. Still, how does the Flood narrative lend itself as instructional for a "Great Commission" understanding in the OT? It seems best to put this all together in the one focus of an OT view

³² This is seen in God's third covenant conversation with Abraham in Gen. 17:9-14, and instruction is given concerning the sojourner who joins Israel such as in Ex. 12:48.

³³ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 252.

³⁴ Edwin A. Blum, "1 Peter," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Hebrews through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 243.

of the Great Commission.

The Call to “Come and See”³⁵

All of what has been submitted previously seems best to fit under the rubric of YHWH's revelation of Himself to the nations. From the Garden to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to the Nation of Israel and Moses, the call of YHWH is not for Israel to “go and tell,” but for the nations to “come and see.”³⁶

The Garden displays the original relationship of YHWH and man, it was a perfect relationship. This was broken by the fall, thus requiring reconciliation, which begins with the promise of the Seed. The narrative of the Flood begins with a call to repentance from man's wickedness to a way of YHWH's salvation through the ark, where the Seed is carried through the waters of the Flood via Shem, the Nation of Israel is established in Abraham who is promised to be the Seed-bearer, one who would bless all the nations of the earth and Abraham's nation would be first set apart by way of circumcision. Israel is to be set apart from the other nations by way of obedience in the Mosaic law and therefore receive the blessings of YHWH. And the nations surrounding them would know by this that they are YHWH's and by virtue of that, Who YHWH is. The wisdom literature and the prophets continue this display of who YHWH is and also remind the nation that the Seed, the Messiah is still in view and still anticipated. This seems to be the call, the commission of the OT and we see all the elements of the Great Commission within it, but the call to Israel is to be what God has called her to be, not so that they “go and tell,” but that the nations might “come and see.”³⁷

There is then a comprehensiveness to the idea of what God is doing not only for Israel, but through the Nation as well. Graeme Goldsworthy

³⁵ This term is borrowed from Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 36.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ The only time where this is not explicitly the case seems to be Jonah. Though it is not the whole nation who is tasked with warning of impending judgement, Jonah is to go to a wicked Nineveh and declare judgment if they do not repent. For a longer discussion of the arguments for and against this view, see Daniel C. Timmer, “Jonah and Mission: Missiological Dichotomy, Biblical Theology, and the *via Tertia*,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (2008): 159175.

argues that if one takes the progressive revelatory view of *Heilsgeschichte* (Salvation History), that it would be a mistake to perceive it as only for Israel and to not have the nations of the world in view as well.³⁸ YHWH is seen to be a reconciliatory God with all the authority, and employing all the pieces of the Great Commission as seen in the New Covenant, yet perhaps not stated as directly.

Elements of the Great Commission in the Gospels

Besides the particular “Great Commission” passages themselves, the elements of the Commission are present within the life and ministry of Jesus. When Luke records Jesus’ words that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [Jesus’] name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem,” there is little doubt that this draws upon the message of Jesus from the beginning of his earthly ministry. Luke records five instances where the word *μετάνοια* (repent) is used. Two times uses are attributed to John the Baptizer, and three to the ministry of Jesus. Each time the word is used in regard to sinners repenting, with the exception of Luke 3:8 where sinners are told to bear fruit that is in keeping with repentance. The mission of the great commission as given by Luke includes calling sinners to repentance, just as John the baptizer had done (as the forerunner to Christ) and as Jesus himself had done.

The element of authority in the Great Commission can be seen in the authority of God in the Gospels in and through the life of Jesus. Though it is at the end of His earthly ministry when Jesus claims this authority is given to Him, there are demonstrations of God’s authority earlier in the life and ministry of Jesus. At the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry after He is baptized by John, there is a scene in which the “the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:16b-17; Mark 1:9-11). In the parallel passage in Luke 3:21-23, it’s shown that directly after this, Jesus begins His earthly ministry. In Peter’s sermon at Pentecost he attributes the ministry of Jesus as that which is “attested to [them] by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did

³⁸ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 60.

through him in [their] midst" (Acts 2:22).

The question of the authority of God as seen through Jesus is not in question throughout the Gospels. However, the question may be raised as to the nature of the authority which is mentioned in Great Commission. Nolland states:

The main question about Jesus' authority statement is that of whether Matthew is speaking here of a newly acquired authority or an authority whose reality has been challenged by the Passion events. Matthew has represented Jesus quite frequently in the Gospel as one who has authority. Is something more now involved? Verbally closest from the earlier materials is 'authority on earth to forgive sins' in 9:6. But also important is 'everything has been passed on to me by my Father' in 11:27, which seems to have a comprehensiveness to match that of 28:18 ('all authority in heaven and on earth').³⁹

Nolland finds it best to see the authority spoken of in the Great Commission as a "reaffirming] of authority after the rejection of Jesus."⁴⁰ If this is indeed a reaffirmation, then it seems right to understand that Jesus was imbued with the authority of God from the beginning of His ministry.

In regard to making disciples, this is what Jesus did in His earthly mission. He lives out the example of disciple making before the world. He calls men of lowly stature and of questionable character to follow him, to learn from him, to suffer with him. Michael Wilkins submits that the four gospels each offer unique views of Jesus and His disciples. "Combined," he says, "the sketches of the disciples in each Gospel give us a well-rounded perspective of what Jesus intended discipleship to mean."⁴¹ The whole idea of discipleship, the very mission to which Jesus calls His disciples, is on display in His earthly ministry to them. When He told them to make disciples, He was calling them to do as He did.

Along with this comes the teaching aspect of Jesus' time with His followers. In many ways Jesus' first teaching (the Sermon on the Mount,

³⁹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids; Carlisle: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 1264.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Michael J. Wilkins, "Unique Discipleship to a Unique Master: Discipleship in the Gospel according to Mark," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 8, no. 3 (2004): 51.

Matt. 5-7) captured what He intended to communicate in His earthly mission as well as the pattern for what the disciples are to teach others. Jesus instructed from a Great Commandment perspective, that the disciples should love God and love others, dismantling the Pharisaic legalism of the era. He taught them much about the life of a Christian. With this in view, the rest of Jesus' ministry to them was learning from Him as he taught the crowds, used parables to illustrate or obfuscate, preached sermons that condemned legalism, reached out to those who were the maligned of society, sacrificially washed their feet to demonstrate servanthood and love, and then called them to do the same to one another. Yes, when Jesus called them to teach others what He had taught them, the disciples minds must have flooded with all that meant.

Concerning baptism, the first seen is the baptism of John which is a baptism of repentance and also a way of one identifying and agreeing with his message.⁴² John's baptism seems to set the course for an understanding of Christian baptism based on Jesus's commission for the Disciples. It is interesting to note that Jesus himself never seemed to have baptized anyone,⁴³ however the pattern of baptism as a means of identification has been established before the eyes of the Disciples, so that when Jesus states this as a part of the commission, they understand what He means. There is in the commission, however, the addition of whose name into which disciples are to be baptized: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The baptismal formula is distinct from the other forms of baptism known at the time, including John's baptism, but still

⁴² Osborne submits, "John's practice had several theological ramifications: (1) It was intimately connected with radical repentance, not only of the Gentile but astoundingly (to his contemporaries) also of the Jew. (2) It was eschatological at the core, preparing for the Messiah, who would baptize 'with the Holy Spirit and with fire' (Mt 3:11), and therefore looked to the final separation between God's people and the wicked at the Eschaton (i.e., "the End," cf. Mt 3:12). (3) It symbolized moral purification and so prepared the people for the coming kingdom (Mt 3:2; Lk 3:7-14)." Grant R. Osborne, "Baptism," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 258.

⁴³ Though John 3:22 states that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing, John clarifies in 4:2 that the disciples were the ones baptizing, not Jesus. Carson states, "Only the Fourth Gospel mentions that Jesus baptized, and 4:2 specifies that he himself did not perform the rite but left it to his disciples." D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester; Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press; Eerdmans, 1991), 209.

maintains an identity element.⁴⁴ Therefore, the case can be made that when Jesus declares the Great Commission to His disciples, the elements of which He speaks have been demonstrated to them, and would have brought to mind His ministry to them and amongst them.

Elements of the Great Commission in the New Testament Church

Having seen the OT reconciliatory work of YHWH in general, that Israel was to be a light to the nations, and then to be reminded of the context of the Great Commission in the Gospels, the next premise to delineate is whether the commission Jesus gave to the Apostles is the same commission given to the NT church.

The mission of the Apostles is seen in part in the book of Acts. From the beginning, Peter preaches the Good News of Christ and many are baptized (Acts 2). From here we see the pattern of "church life" as that which may be regarded as "disciple-making." Acts 2:42-47 shows that they gathered together under the Apostles teaching, breaking bread together, selling and sharing their possessions, fellowshiping, and seeing God add to their numbers.

In addition to this, the NT Church is born into an era of persecution, and from its earliest days there is a scattering which occurs. Acts 8:1-8 outlines the beginnings of this dispersion, so that the gospel and disciple-making becomes a broader effort. This is in line with what Jesus told His disciples at the beginning of Acts, where he states "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8b).

The elements of the Great Commission are then seen within not only the early days of the church as pictured in Acts, but also as the letters which are written to the churches throughout Asia are distributed. These elements are not outlined in a concise manner as it is in Matthew's Gospel, but nonetheless the elements are present and disseminated throughout. Taking for example, 1 Corinthians, where Paul does give a succinct gospel (1 Cor. 15:1-4), but also mentions baptism (1 Cor. 1:10-17)⁴⁵ and as well, in the essence of the letter, is discipling the Corinthian

⁴⁴ Blomberg states, "In [or into] the name' means declaring allegiance to or becoming associated with the power and authority of Jesus." Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 432.

⁴⁵ Though Paul says that he was sent to preach the gospel and not baptize, it is

church. The quintessence of the Great Commission is not lost in any of the Epistles.

What Paul and Peter and the other writers of the NT are doing is archetypal disciple-making. The very efforts of Paul and Barnabas are witness to the Great Commission continuing on. They planted churches, trained up leaders, and gospel ministry was begun in the Near East. In the midst of this planting and training, Paul tells Timothy to pass on what he has learned to faithful men (2 Tim. 2:2), and tells Titus that the work of the pastor is to train men and women who likewise train other men and women (Titus 2). It is in the warp and woof of the New Testament that the expanse of the Great Commission is seen. As Christopher Wright states,

[m]ost of Paul's letters were written in the heat of his missionary efforts: wresting with the theological basis of the inclusion of the Gentiles, affirming the need for Jew and Gentile to accept one another in Christ and in the church....confronting insipient heresies with clear affirmations of the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and so on.⁴⁶

Though the Great Commission is not stated directly as the mission of the church, its elements are seen throughout the New Testament. However, some have proffered that the Great Commission was only for the eleven disciples, and is not meant to be transferred to the church which comes after them.⁴⁷ From a different perspective, there are those who say that the Great Commission itself is not a mandate for the disciples to proclaim the Gospel at all.⁴⁸ In response to these kinds of statements Ernest

clear in the context not only that he did baptize some, but also that baptism had occurred. The issue is not that Paul saw baptism as unnecessary, but rather that the Corinthian division over who had baptized them was foolish.

⁴⁶ Mike Barnett and Robin Martin, eds., *Discovering the Mission of God: Best Missional Practices for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 36.

⁴⁷ For one example of this, see Bob Seidensticker, "The Great Commission and How It Doesn't Apply to You"

<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/crossexamined/2015/02/the-great-commission-and-how-it-doesnt-apply-to-you-Jesus/#Z5cvAEfMMwdf0jTU.99>

⁴⁸See Ernest Pickering, "Distinctive Teachings Of Ultra-Dispensationalism," *Central C. B. Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1961): 40.

Pickering offers “[t]hat this commission was to be obeyed throughout the church age seems evident from the promise of the Lord that He would support them in the ministry, ‘even unto the end of the age.’”⁴⁹ From these evidences, and from the pages of the early church itself, it seems clear that the mission of the church as the Great Commission, remains the same throughout the ages.

Elements of the Great Commission in the Early Post-Apostolic Era

A further evidence of Great Commission work in the age of the NT Church can be seen in the history of the church. It would be too large an undertaking to bring the scope of all of church history into view, but peering into the world of the early postapostolic era will prove to show the pattern of the Great Commission continued on. In order to accomplish this, there will be a brief survey at the purpose of the *Didache*.

The *Didache* is said to be “a ‘catechetical handbook’ for those who had recently joined the Christian family from among the Gentiles.”⁵⁰ William Varner concludes that this “was the first Christian Handbook of which we are aware.”⁵¹ What is included in this handbook that would give evidence that the Great Commission was assumed to be the mission of the early postapostolic church? It is assumed to be the teachings of the Twelve Apostles passed down from Jesus to them, and then to the church. All of it is seen to be a catechism for pre-baptized communicants.⁵² Those who were evangelized, were then catechized and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁰ William Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook* (Lanham: UPA, 2007), 3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 14.

⁵² This is why Varner concludes as he does that this is the “first Christian Handbook” stating, “Many writers have noticed that the command to baptize in 7:1 indicates that the baptism was to take place ‘after you have said all these things beforehand.’ In other words ‘all these things’ must refer to the instruction that had already been given in the first six chapters. It seems to be evident, therefore, that the first six chapters are a compendium of pre-baptismal catechetical instruction that was to be taught to recent converts from paganism to prepare them for that decisive act by which they entered the Christian community. If that was indeed the effect that the text had on later generations, it will help to confirm our explanation of why the book originated.” Ibid.

subsequently baptized. The early church appeared to practice the very words of Jesus in the commission.⁵³

Fulfilment of the Great Commission in the Consummation

The great commission has as its goal the making of disciples of every tribe, tongue and nation. In Revelation 5 we see a picture of the commission in the vision of John when he sees the multitudes singing to the Lamb as One slain, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9-10).

John's vision gives us a picture of what has been happening since the Fall, which is God's reconciliatory work, realized ultimately in the Second Person of the Trinity putting on humanity and laying down His life for His sheep. This all culminates in the eternal state where representatives of all the nations of the earth are walking by the light of the glory of God. The Commission to make disciples of all the nations is complete and those who have been reconciled by God unto Himself are in His presence forever.

Conclusion

Is it a true and all-encompassing statement to say that the heart of God is missions? The study undertaken in this paper has sought to show that when one takes the elements found within Jesus' "Great Commission" statement and applies it as a hermeneutical grid through which the reconciliatory nature of God can be seen, it is possible to see a great commission-like theme throughout the Scriptures. One may be able to argue against this in the minutia of one for one statements, but it does not seem possible to argue against the overarching theme of God's reconciliatory work, and these elements being present throughout the

⁵³ It is interesting to note that there is a reversal of the order which Jesus gave, that the teaching would come before the baptizing. There appear to be practical reasons for this, especially concerning Gentile converts who would need to be taught the basics of the faith. For more information on the *Didache* and the exact words used, please see William Varner, *The Way of the Didache: The First Christian Handbook* (Lanham: UPA, 2007).

scope of biblical theology. As D.A. Carson states:

The promise that through Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed, gradually expanded into a major theme in the Old Testament, now bursts into the Great Commission, the mushrooming growth of the Jewish church into the Gentile world, the spreading flame reaching across the Roman Empire and beyond, in anticipation of the climactic consummation of God's promises in the new heaven and the new earth.⁵⁴

⁵⁴D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, Fifteenth Edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 263.