

Reaching the Lost Through Relationships

The Great Commission is one of the most significant passages in the Holy Bible. It is the last recorded personal instruction given by Jesus to His disciples and it is a special calling from Jesus Christ to all His followers to take specific action while on this earth. It is the greatest speech ever been given in the history of the world which has motivated millions of man hours and billions of dollars of expenditures. It is found in Matthew 28:18-20:

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.

Noted author and men’s leader Pat Morley says, “Those powerful, razor sharp, bottom line sentences have struck to the very core of men’s hearts for centuries...those words have acted as an acid to burn away all pursuits less important...and mobilized millions of believers to action.” The Great Commission is the end of a Gospel and the beginning of faith in action for all Christians. This command from Jesus is significant because it's a personal instruction for Christians to have a profound faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus says, *“All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.”* This is an incredibly powerful statement which demands faith in Him, validating His power in the lives of Christians and their commitment to Him. This verse acts as a clear claim to Christ's omnipotence, and therefore His deity.

Jesus also gives His believers specific directions to follow after they have affirmed their faith when He says, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...”* He calls us to act and share the Good News of salvation throughout the world. In the previous chapter we learned that the importance of *Missio Dei*—the concept of God being the Sender of His people into the world to fulfill the Great Commission. Now we are going to look at us (believers) as being those representatives on this earth with a mission in mind. This is referred to as the “Image of God” (often appearing in Latin as *Imago Dei*). It is a concept and theological doctrine that asserts that human beings are created in God's image and are the ones through whom God's plans and purposes can be made known and actualized. The moral connotation of the doctrine of *Imago Dei* is that if humans are to love God, then humans must love other humans, as each is an expression of God. In other words, because God is Love then we must love others. Because of this love and compassion, tens of thousands of believers travel each year on missionary trips throughout the earth, spreading the word of Jesus Christ. Many Christians have made incredible sacrifices, traveling to remote regions of the world beyond the civilized cities into jungles and deserts. Mission fields can also be very close to home. It could be a neighbor who has not heard the Good News or a poverty stricken area just down the road where people can't afford Bibles. In the 21st century, the Internet has become a mission field where people can reach out and share Christ's love. The places and people who need to hear the Gospel are everywhere!

In the last verse of the Great Commission as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus provides specific direction with affirmation to His followers, *“...teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* Christians are instructed to teach others about Jesus Christ and the entirety of His truth. We can't profess Christ as Savior and Lord, while rejecting certain elements of His teachings. As we teach Christ's truths, verse 20 declares that we can be confident, in faith, that Jesus Christ will support us. This fact has proven trustworthy throughout the centuries as millions of believers have heard, accepted and shared the

Good News of Jesus Christ. Yes, Christ has ascended back to heaven, but He is present by the power of the Holy Spirit in every believer!

In the Great Commission, Jesus calls every Christian to step out in faith and spread the Good News. This is faith in action! People who obey this command change their spiritual lives forever! It could be spreading the Good News to a neighbor or moving to another country to reach the people there. It could be sharing with less fortunate kids down the street or spreading the Word in a town two hours away. Wherever we go, every faithful Christian is compelled through obedience to share the Gospel.

Here or There?

Jesus' command in Matthew 28 is clear, "*make disciples of all nations.*" So, for 2,000 years Christ's followers have gone to neighborhoods around the world to share the Gospel. It seems that we have always thought of the Great Commission as being fulfilled in some distant land—a land called "over there." In the minds of many, the people needing to be saved live in a remote jungle, a foreign city, or a strange culture. We tend to think of "world missions" in visions of khaki clad missionaries fighting their way through impenetrable forests. This line of thinking doesn't work in the 21st century. Something has been happening. "The nations" are on the move. The ethnic makeup of neighborhoods in America has been changing. The world has moved in next door.

The publication *Mission America Monthly* (January 1998) says that "the United States is now the third largest mission field in the world—only India and China have more nonbelievers." America is truly a mission field. Consider these facts:

- South Korea has the church with one of the largest congregations in the world
- Another church with a large attendance is in Lagos, Nigeria
- The largest Buddhist temple is located in Boulder, Colorado
- The world's largest Muslim training center is in New York City
- The world's largest training center for Transcendental Meditation is in Fairfield, Iowa
- Each year nearly 500,000 students and scholars from virtually every nation on earth are enrolled to begin a four year sojourn in American colleges and universities
- Every day more than 175 different languages are spoken in this country, and millions either do not speak English or have a poor understanding of it.

The challenge of the Great Commission to reach "all the world" can be fulfilled in our neighborhoods. Our new neighbors were born in different cultures, speak different languages and have different values than many of us. Those of us who were not called to be missionaries overseas can now be missionaries in our own zip code! God has brought the nations to our doorsteps and is calling us to serve Him in where we live, work and play. Today, more than ever, we have the chance to grasp the full meaning of loving God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. The big question is, "How?"

How do we love our new neighbors? If you desire to fulfill the Great Commission in your personal life then living as a missionary in your neighborhood is not an option. There is a "mission on your doorstep" and in order to fulfill this mission you must be inspired, informed and equipped to reach the nations living in your own community.

Almost everyone living in America is from an immigrant family, but immigration today looks a lot different than it did 200 years ago. Now we have to ask questions like, "How do we respond to the immigration question?" "What does the Bible say about immigrants?" "How should our evangelical churches respond to the thousands of undocumented immigrants living among us?"

We'll talk more about this later, but our first response should be to seek God and try to understand not only their culture, but their plight. We need to try to figure out what life is like for a Mexican, Korean or Filipino immigrant family living in the U.S. We need to learn how to cross race, class and culture lines. We need to deal with prejudice, apathy, indifference and busyness that can easily short circuit our attempts to help these people and bring a credible witness of the Gospel to them.

From God's point of view the "there" is now "here." For most of us that means that we are already where we've been sent. The greatest mission field we could ever hope for has arrived right where we reside. God has placed us in neighborhoods and our church in communities all over this nation so that we might make disciples right where we live and work. Thus, not only do we not have to go elsewhere to fulfill the Great Commission, but in fact our primary mission is here, right on our doorstep, right across the street, right in our schools, neighborhoods, and offices.

Missionary or Minister?

First, a statement of truth: the Great Commission will never be accomplished without the laity of the church. Plain and simple. The people of God are the workers God has chosen to partner with Him in the fulfillment of this exciting command to the body of Christ. The traditional church view regarding the laity, one that we have heard for years, is "every believer a minister." Reggie McNeal in his thought-provoking book titled *The Present Future* challenges this assumption. He says, "Every time I see the slogan 'every member a minister' I cringe." "It usually means that there has been a lot of effort put into getting church members to get church work done." McNeal calls this "myopic vision" and says it has resulted in ministry being defined largely in church terms and lay people often being viewed as functionary resources to get church work done. The "workers" in the Great Commission certainly involve the laity but they must be viewed not only as workers, but as partners in ministry with the Lord. Also, there is a vast difference between "church work" and the "work of the church."

The work of the church is not always in the church—it is *Kingdom* work. The ministry of the Laity goes far beyond the four walls of local congregations. Laity need more than just "jobs in the church." They have been called and gifted by our Lord for ministry in the community as well. The Great Commission doesn't say, "Go into all the world and make *workers* of all nations *nagging* them in the name of the Lord." This is what is happening in many churches where pastors feel sad that they can't get their lay people to get "involved." We need to take a fresh look at the involvement of the laity in ministry and the concept of "every member a missionary" since the world has moved to our doorsteps.

An easy-to-remember definition of ministry is that it is Christian work that involves the acts, duties and services of every believer where they live, work and worship. Ministry is any human activity that is entered into on behalf of Jesus and His gospel. The word "minister" is not only a noun—it is also a verb! Ministry involves finding and meeting human needs spiritually, socially and physically. We move beyond "talk" and actually "do." There is a presumption that what we hear, we know. We must gain our knowledge from experience, not just knowing intellectually. Most of our adult lives are spent on our jobs—in our "working world."

The Church has wrestled long, but never definitively, with the problem of Christian vocation and daily work in the secular world. Are laymen and women "called," or are only clergymen? Can daily work in the secular world be or ever become "sacred?" A better understanding of the term "vocation" might be helpful. It comes from the Latin *vocatio* which means "to summon" or "to call." Vocation was originally used in the 15th century for the call into the priesthood or a religious order. Originally only those in religious work had a "vocation" or calling – everyone else simply had a job

to make a living. Gradually vocation came to be broadened to include all people and came to mean the work in which a person is regularly employed. The truth is that all of life, including our job, or employment is a calling from God.

The success of the fulfillment of the Great Commission really hinges on the laity understanding this “call” and responding to it. This “invitation” is really a “life calling” or general call from God to all people to live a life of service—to leave the world a better place than they found it—more in line with God’s values. Every Christian has a “life calling” from God. Our “life calling” answers one of the deepest questions of life—why am I here? A life calling is different than career planning, or even vocational choice—it is about what we need to do with our life to accomplish God’s great plan on earth. Not merely God’s plan for the church, but His intentions for the whole earth. That is, God is at work, both in the church and the world, so that His Kingdom might come on Earth—making a world where God’s values prevail. Our role in cooperating with God to bring this to pass then becomes our life calling. A life calling will influence our vocational choices, but it is much bigger than a person’s career or job. Finding our life calling may be the most important thing we can do, for it is discovering our purpose for living. It is what God wants us to do with our life.

Primary among our purposes in daily life, where we work and reside, must be the conviction that we are placed in this world, and in our particular spot in the world, as “salt” and “light” (Matthew 5:13-16). When Jesus described Christians as salt and light, He was not speaking about just the possibility of us being salt and light. He made a bold statement and said we *are* salt and light and not only that, we are *all* the salt and light the world has! However salty we are, however penetrating our light, we are all of it there is. In our communities, in our workplaces, in our recreation places—salt and light will be coming from believers who really believe that they can make a difference in the lives of others around them. The best way to do this is by developing one-to-one relationships with the unbelievers and the unchurched. One-to-one personal witnessing requires transparency and living the Christlike life every day. There is no room for any holier-than-thou attitude that is a real “turn off” to the unsaved around us.

We don’t want to move away from the laity becoming ministers, but the laity must also learn to think like missionaries. God is looking for lay men and women who will accept the call to become a “minister,” get involved in “ministry” and then learn the wisdom of the mind of a “missionary.” When a missionary goes to a foreign culture he or she must (1) learn all about the culture (2) respect the culture (3) communicate to the culture and (4) reach the lost within the culture with the message of salvation. The current term for all of this is “missionalological” thinking “missiology.” The technical meaning of this term is “mission science” and is defined as the area of practical theology which investigates the mandate, message and work of the Christian missionary. So if we are to win the world beginning at home we must become culturally relevant missionaries in our thinking and approach (our culture is not their culture, our beliefs and not their beliefs, etc.). We must understand the culture so we can build bridges to it for the sake of gaining a hearing for the gospel of Jesus. Pastor Brian McLaren of Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, D.C. says it this way, “We have to approach our culture with a missionary strategy as though we were presenting the gospel for the first time. Christian faith thrives in this kind of situation and provides us with wonderful ministry opportunities.”

The point is not to adopt the culture and lose the message; the point is to understand the culture so we can build bridges to it for the sake of gaining a hearing for the gospel of our Lord. We should obey the Lord wherever we are and know that the Holy Spirit will enable us to connect to others, and somehow bring a witness to the plan of God for one’s life. Elton Trueblood has called it our “Other Vocation.” It has to do with the investment of our gifts in addition to our daily work and community life. To be “on duty” for Christ in the world of work involves more than just a 40 hour

work week. There are 168 hours in a week and we are to be accountable for all of them. Our role is to step out in faith, learn about our culture(s), start conversations, ask questions, explore all of the open doors and leave the rest up to God.

New or Old?

The timeless message of the Great Commission always has to be considered in the context of the world as it exists today. We are told that our world is a “postmodern world.” What does this really mean to the evangelical church? Years ago, before the Oldsmobile division of General Motors ceased production, they came out with a commercial featuring the words, “This ain’t your daddy’s Oldsmobile.” The implication, of course, was that it was a new and modern vehicle and that it had undergone great changes. This is a verbal image of our world as we know it today—it has undergone great change. One of the current buzzwords that we hear today is “raplexity” which is defined as “rapid and complex change.” We are told that we have moved from a modern world to a postmodern world.

The modern world is really a misnomer because in reality it has been around for about five hundred years! It is the period of history that followed the Middle Ages (which ended approximately 1500 AD). The modern era includes what has been called an early modern period, which lasted from c. 1500–1800. This period ended in a time of change and upheaval. The 18th century Enlightenment, then followed by the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and an Age of Revolutions, beginning with those in America and France, and then pushed forward in other countries partly as a result of upheavals of the Napoleonic Wars. The contemporary era began in the 20th century and the included World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.

The modern period was a period of significant development in the fields of science, politics, warfare, and technology. It also was an age of discovery and globalization. The brutal wars and other problems of this era, many of which come from the effects of rapid change, and the connected loss of strength of traditional religious and ethical norms, have led to many reactions against modern development. Optimism and belief in constant progress have been most recently criticized by postmodernism, our current historical era. Anyone over 40 is from this “modern age.” This is the age of reason and rational thinking. This is the age of the printed word and absolutes.

But here in the 21st century we’re in a new world: the world of postmodernism. This is the age of experiential and visual. In this age we are all connected and there are few (if any) absolutes. In just one generation we’ve moved from a “Gutenberg world” to a “Google world!” The printed page is being replaced by the electronic page of e-mails, text messages and the Internet.

Who are these people that are all around us? They are not just the pierced and tattooed. We are told that this group includes just about everybody under the age of forty. They have been described in different terms—postmodern, Gen-X, even the overused “contemporary.” They have always had a PIN number, they have grown up with computers as a way of life. There has never been a time when they have not had a cell phone. They are parents as well as kids, they are teachers as well as students. They are engineers as well as artists. They are our community. They are our neighbors. They are the future.

They seem to be information rich, but upon close examination they are spiritually poor. They need the spiritual wisdom that only God can give them. The challenge is to help change their mind about pluralistic thinking. They believe that there are many ways to God. How do we reach post moderns who believe that “it’s fine for you, but not for me?”

The challenge to reach our current culture has great implications for the evangelical community wanting to be obedient to the Great Commission. When Jesus said, “Go into all the

world,” what does that world look like today? Our burden and passion to reach the lost has, and will continue, to cause a clash of cultures. The big question is: how do we connect the timeless message of the past with the postmodern culture of the present in which interest in religion is low, but desire for spirituality is high?

This new era of Postmodernism officially began in 1960, but as with all historical transitions, it has taken some time to show up in our daily life. Universities are generally one of the first places where new ideas take hold, while culture at large lags behind. And what lags behind in the general culture is usually true of the Christian culture. One well known church consultant had this to say after visiting many churches that were literally in a time warp and still trying to do God’s business with traditional methods. He said, “Well if the 1950’s ever come back I personally know of many congregations that will be ready for them!” How do we reach our new culture? One thing is for sure: we can’t go backwards in time. L. P. Hartley said, “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

When it comes to culture, Christians generally have one of three attitudes:

1. **We fight it:** We hear generalizations like “Everything in our modern culture is wrong.” Ironically, when we were heavily in the era of modernism, few evangelicals bought into it lock, stock, and barrel. But now that we are past modernism, many evangelicals are longing for the good old days. Change is resisted and the old ways are used—even if they are not working. The ministry of our local churches is sometimes segmented from other parts of our life (business, family recreation etc.) resulting in a disconnect between the church and the community. This is a reality with at least two groups in the church: men and boys. Man in the Mirror Ministries, a para-church group in Florida says that 25% of women in church worship without their husbands and 90% of the boys who are being raised in the church will abandon it by their 20th birthday.

2. **We join it:** We become conformed to the cultural values that surround us. This is NOT where we need to be. We call these groups “cultural churches” because they endorse the culture and blend in with it to the extent that they surrender their core beliefs just to reach others. Churches like this care little for society, think little of missions, evangelism, or social issues that must be addressed by believers. Some “seeker-oriented churches” continually face the temptation to put a priority on relevance over truth. In other words, some church’s willingly “water down the truth” in an attempt to be relevant and conform to the culture.

3. **Connect to it:** In John 17: 14-15 Jesus said, *“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.”* This truth is unchanging: we are *in* the world but are not *of* the world. What then do we do with the culture? We do the same thing Jesus did: we engage it! Luke 5: 27-32 tells a beautiful story about Jesus engaging the culture. *“After these things He went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax office. And He said to him, “Follow Me.” So he left all, rose up, and followed Him. Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, “Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered and said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance.”* The big surprise here is that Jesus would show up for this “great feast.” The reason is because His desire was, still is, and always will be *“to seek and save that which was lost.”* (Luke 19:10). Jesus offered no one charity. He gave Himself. Can we do any less? We have to offer the people of our world today Jesus! Paul never argued that Christ could top the mystery religions and other ecstatic cults in terms of religious experience. He

offered the truth – Jesus Christ and him crucified. This was the power of God to which he wanted them exposed.

Postmodernists will respond to the gospel. They are looking for authentic relationships that offer meaning and connectedness. They are truly hungry for a real experience with God. In addition, they will attend a church that affords them the best experience – a church they will "like." It could be a church offering a warm and safe non-threatening environment with a friendly, relevant, open-minded pastor who leads an exciting Sunday morning contemporary experience and teaches biblical principles focusing upon marriage, the family, values and morals. This is a spirit-filled church where people are born again and come to church full of joy and expectation. Could this be our church?