† Blessed is our God always, as it is now, was in the beginning, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. † ...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. † Through the prayers of our holy Ancestors, Lord Jesus Christ our God, have mercy on us and save us. Amen. Glory to You, our God, glory to You.

O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, You are everywhere and fill all things, Treasury of blessings, and Giver of life: come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.

† Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy on us (three times).

† Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it is now, was in the beginning, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

The Great Commission
A Fresh Look

*Pre-view*

When we begin to look at the Great Commission afresh, from that old perspective of Ezekiel’s Tetramorphs[[1]](#endnote-1) we get a fresh perspective on mission and evangelism. The Church has always, at least in part, associated Ezekiel’s Tetramorphs with the four Evangelists. This is the same picture we see in Revelation: for, as soon as we greet the Tetramorphs of Revelation, the Great and Holy Book is opened by Jesus.[[2]](#endnote-2) So, as we see the Great Commission from the broader scope of all four Gospels, and more; we have every hope of finding that reenergizing and restrengthening of the Church, for which we all yearn, in this tragic, post-Christian era.

We begin:

*Matthew 28:18-20*

Jesus came and spoke to them, “All authority is given to Me in heaven and in earth. While you are scurrying about, make disciples of all nations: baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; teaching them to protect and obey everything I have commanded you: look, I am always with you, even to the end of the world.” Amen.

Matthew’s perspectives on the Great Commission are rooted in the final authority of Jesus. As a part of our daily lives, we are to make disciples throughout the world: not by missionary zeal, but by love of neighbor. Two distinct steps are involved in this: baptizing, then teaching, not teaching then baptizing.

Since the theme of Matthew seems to be forgiveness, this means that Jesus wants the newly baptized to know that they are forgiven. So, baptism brings two things:

* On our part, a life-long commitment to becoming a more forgiving person every day.
* On God’s part, an eternal commitment to give the Holy Spirit in all His power; so, our becoming more Christ-like (forgiving) is made possible.
* With any honest commitment to forgiveness, comes a concomitant commitment to fight sin in our, as well as in our neighbor’s life; yet, when we fall aside, there is always a community of forgiveness.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Jesus also expects, from all the baptized, a life-long commitment to learning His things. The word Jesus uses in not observe (look at): it means to guard (with our lives) or treasure (with all our hearts) and to heed or obey everything the Spirit will teach.

* We are all to become ultimate philologists: life-long lovers of learning, so that we would rather die than not search the Scriptures.

For Matthew, the Great Commission is the Authority delegated with the purpose of making disciples (Christians are defined as disciples, a community of forgiveness in the Spirit).

*Mark 16:15-20*

He said to them, “While you are scurrying about, all over the world, proclaim the gospel to all creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. These signs will follow believers: in My name, they will expel demons; speak new languages; remove Satanists; if they drink any deadly poison, it will not harm them[[4]](#endnote-4); they will lay hands on the infirm, and they will be well.”

So then, after the Lord had [finished] speaking to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. They went out, and proclaimed everywhere, the Lord working with them, and confirming the Word with attendant signs. Amen.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Mark sees the Great Commission as fearless proclamation. As with Matthew, this is not a mandate to missions, rather it is an expectation that believers will quickly spread throughout the world; so, wherever they find themselves, they are to proclaim.

Baptism is again seen as part and parcel with belief; a believing person will be baptized, together with his whole willing household: wife, children, extended family, servants. Failure to believe puts oneself in jeopardy of punishment. Failure to be baptized is a strong indication of unbelief.

The Holy Spirit is attendant to provide whatever confirmation is necessary to support the proclamation. The proclamation is of the Word, not merely a message. The Word refers to Jesus: we are to proclaim Him in the power of the Spirit. This is not a public speaking course; this is the natural response to becoming excited about the Father, Son, and Spirit, so that the joy of Christianity oozes from every pore. The proclamation of Mark is informed by the philology of Matthew: no learning = no proclamation; learning = spontaneous proclamation.

* We are all to become ultimate proclaimers: life-long lovers of proclamation, so that we would rather die than not talk about God.

For Mark, the Great Commission is the spontaneous breaking forth of proclamation from the Spirit through the heart (Christians are defined as a community that can’t stop talking about God).

*Luke 24:25-53*

He said to them, “O foolish, and slow hearted to believe all, which the prophets spoke! Was it not binding [for] Christ to suffer these things, and to enter into his glory?” So, beginning from Moses and from all the prophets, he interpreted for them in all the writings the things concerning himself.

As they drew near to the village, where they going: He appeared to be going farther. They urged Him, “Abide with us: for evening is approaching, and the day has already ended. So, He went in to stay with them. Then, it happened, as He reclined with them, taking the bread, He blessed, and breaking, He served them. Then their eyes were opened; they recognized Him; but, He became invisible from them.

Then they said to each other, “Wasn’t our heart[[6]](#endnote-6) burning in us, as he spoke to us on the road, as he explained the writings to us?”

So, standing up the same hour, they returned to Jerusalem, where they found the eleven and others gathered together with them, saying that the Lord was awakened visibly[[7]](#endnote-7), and appeared to Simon. Then they reported the events on the road, especially how He was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

As they were discussing these events, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you.” But, they were terrified, and in fear, supposed that they saw a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you troubled? Why do arguments boil up in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet, that I Am, He. Touch Me, and see: because a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see me have.” While He was saying this, he shewed them his hands and his feet. Yet they still could not believe for joy, wondering. He said to them, “Do you have anything to eat here?” So, they gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and some honeycomb. Taking [these] He ate in their presence.

Then He said to them, “These are the Words, which I told you, while I was still with you; that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, Prophets, and Psalms, must be fulfilled.”

Then He opened their minds to understand the writings. He said to them, “Thus, it stands written, and thus it is binding [for] Christ to suffer, and to stand up from the dead the third day; so that, repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in His Name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Look, I commission you [with] the announcement of my Father. But, stay in the city of Jerusalem, until you are imbued with power from on high.”

At last, He led them out as far as Bethany, lifting up His hands, He blessed them. So, it came about, in His [gift] to bless them, He was separated from them, and lifted up into heaven. They, bowing down to Him, returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Thus, they were always in the temple blessing God. Amen.

Luke understands the Great Commission as learning to see Jesus from the Old Testament and from Communion. So far, we have been careful to point out that the Great Commission is driven by the Holy Spirit: Luke is where that notion originates.[[8]](#endnote-8) Thus, the first rudiments of Christian worship are outlined as the intensive growth in understanding: first of the Old Testament (the Liturgy of the Word); and second, of the Communion (the pageantry Liturgy of the True Body and like Precious Blood). It is steeping in these for a lifetime that brings about real growth in grace. Note that the Spirit’s teaching is based on solid historic facts, not on sensationalism and imagination.[[9]](#endnote-9) Acts 1 and 2 provide additional details.

* We are all to become ultimate seers, not of a magical false future, but of Jesus in the Old Testament, and in Communion.
* We are to be committed to learning from the Old Testament, and from Communion as the Holy Spirit teaches us. Teaching takes place at such a level that it is cut into us: we become the living book and bread.

For Luke, the Great Commission is the growth in understanding brought about as the Spirit teaches; so, that we see Jesus in the Old Testament and in Communion (Christians are defined as the community of Jesus, the living book and the living bread).

*John 21:14-25*

Now this was the third time that Jesus was blazed in light before His disciples, having been awakened from the dead.

So, when they had eaten, Jesus says to Simon Peter, “Simon, of Jonah, do you love Me (selflessly) more than these?” He answers Him, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You (mutually).” He responds to him, “Graze my lambs.”

He says again to him, a second time, “Simon, of Jonah, do you love Me (selflessly)? He answers Him, “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You (mutually).” He responds to him, “Shepherd my sheep.”

He says to him, the third time, “Simon, of Jonah, do you [even] love Me (mutually)?” Peter was aggravated, because He said to him, “Do you [even] love Me (mutually),” for the third time.” He answered Him, “Lord, You know everything. You know that I love you (mutually).” He responds to him, “Graze my sheep.”

“Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were younger, you dressed yourself, and walked wherever you wished; yet, when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you, and will carry you where you do not wish.” (He said this, indicating by what sort of death he will glorify God.) Saying this, He exhorted him, “Follow me!”

Peter, turning, saw the disciple whom Jesus loved, following, the same one who also leaned on His breast at the Supper, and asked, “Lord, who is betraying You? Peter seeing him says to Jesus, “Lord, but what about this man? Jesus answers him, “If I want him to stay until I return, what is that to you? You follow Me. So, this Word circulated among the brothers and sisters, that this disciple does not die. Yet, Jesus did not say to him [Peter] that he [John] does not die; but, “If I want him to stay until I return, what is that to you?”

This is the disciple who, witnessing about these things, [is] also writing these things, so we know that his witness is true. Now there are also many other things whatever Jesus did, which, if they would be written individually, I suppose that not even the world itself [were enough] to contain the books being written. Amen.

John perceives the Great Commission from the Apostolic-servant perspective. Leaders are easily distracted from their appointed focus and goals. There are only a few additional things necessary in leaders for fulfilling the Great Commission. It all sounds so simple, until you count the cost: love, feed, follow.

* Leaders are to love Jesus to the best of their ability, even when they are painfully aware of how far short they fall: it is never enough, no man can ever be adequate to the task.
* Leaders are to spiritually feed, nurture, heal, and protect the sheep at all costs.
* Leaders are to follow Jesus, even unto death.

For John, the Great Commission is the Apostolic-servant leadership heritage of the Church, leading in love, feeding, and following (Christians are defined by their love for God and each other, by being spiritually well fed and cared for, and by the intensity with which they follow the final authority of Jesus).

*Post-view*

The Great Commission is all too often thought of in terms of organizations, and programs. Some churches are simply organized to death. There are churches so organized that no one can breathe, there is no freedom of life in the Spirit, everyone is caught in the constricting coils of the serpent named organization: that, my friends, is a work of sinful human flesh.

Mission organizations are all right as long as no one is dragged into the work by coercion of conscience, by false guilt, or by delusions of glory. If that is what God has called you to do, do it speedily with all your strength.

However, the Great Commission does not emphasize either of these things: organizations or programs. The whole emphasis of the Great Commission has been stated in terms of personal and community development and growth: forgiveness, obedience to the Spirit’s teaching from the Bible, exuberant proclamation that develops naturally in life, fixation on seeing Jesus in both the Old Testament and Communion, loving, following, and spiritual feeding.

The Church exists to be what it is, the Body of Christ. The Great Commission flows naturally from the bodily functions of the Church. Christians are to be more committed to their personal development, and to the development of others than they need to be concerned about programs and stewardship. The true steward is primarily concerned about developing the whole team to engage in spiritual warfare.

Frequently, the Great Commission has been treated as a business and failed miserably, because it is not a business either, it’s a life. We do not need powerful marketing campaigns, flashy sales programs featuring babes and hot music, or advertising that finally identifies the proper way to package Christ.

Where mission organizations operate in the field as businesses, they find themselves going head to head with commercial businesses. Soon they discover that they are no match for real businessmen; then they find that the competitiveness of business has spoiled all the fruit of evangelism.

Rather, Christians need to practice living as what they are. This will transform the way they do business: not the other way around. People will see the genuineness of their labors, and that will develop fruit naturally. The business model is fraudulent and fake.

Evangelism programs are, for the most part, only clever sales pitches. If these are delivered without the sincerity of life developing from dedicated Christian commitment and hard teamwork, they are doomed to failure. The Christian team will crash in discouragement. The world will come to see Christianity as a lie.

The Church needs to once again, call men and women of all ages to personal and team commitment as well as simple Spirit led obedience. Life develops around being and becoming what we already are by baptism. We gather to be the Body of Christ soiled and wounded by contact with the world. We worship to be the Body of Christ nourished, fed, forgiven, and healed. We go out into the world to be the tangible Body of Christ lifting up the fallen world to God, and proclaiming forgiveness in the Father, Son, and Spirit everywhere we happen to go.[[10]](#endnote-10)

The Church is a lot like Charlotte. Her children are blown away, being carried on the wings of the wind all over world. Everywhere they go, they take a little piece of Charlotte with them. It’s a sad story, a story that only a pig will appreciate. The Church’s children are carried all over the world, more by accident and happenstance than by design. Everywhere they go, they take a little duplicate of Jesus with them.

Most folks can spot a fraud coming from a mile away. Our task is to learn to be and behave as a genuine Christ-like people. We’ve got to be and become the real deal.[[11]](#endnote-11)

In this desperate hour, the post-Christian era, when the wounded Church is so desperately in need of spiritual recovery, we need to rethink how we are going about obeying the Lord.

It starts with me. I want to strive to be and become a different sort of person. Will you walk with me for one hour?

[[12]](#endnote-12)

1. We are not surprised that both Ezekiel and John struggle to describe that which is inherently indescribable. We do not fail to notice the calf-like comparison with the cherubim. Ezekiel 1:5-10 (man, lion, calf, eagle); 10:14 (cherubim, man, lion, eagle); Revelation 4:7 (lion, calf, man, eagle) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Which may drop a hint to us that the Bible itself confirms the view of the early Church that Ezekiel’s Tetramorphs are indeed the four Evangelists. Such a view can only be confirmed, when we read in Revelation 10 that the Apostle John takes the little Holy Book, a portion of the Great and Holy Book, and eats it. We believe it is this process of devouring and digesting a meal of the Divine Book, which has as its product our Gospel of John. This, then, informs us about the formational development of all the Gospels, as well as of the whole Bible: The Bible’s core value is only developed when it is devoured and digested under the teaching and application power of the Spirit. As with John, such a lifestyle is sure to create a fire in the belly: it cannot be otherwise. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 6:14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is metaphor; it refers to imperviousness, a tough hide in the face of abusive and evil speech, curses, and the like. It’s the Spirit’s strength to say, “Father forgive them”, when they’re killing you. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It makes little difference whether this is or is not included in the original. Even if it is not part of the original, it voices the viewpoint of the early fourth century church that this summarizes Mark’s main point. We are not simply free to discard or ignore it. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. One heart shared by many is a common experience. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This is His state of being or existence, the adverb of, to be. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Luke 11:13; 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:4; 16-21 [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In a sad, yet real sense, the whole Church has been infected by the poison of Higher Criticism. Even though we fought against it, the poison has had some impact on our lives. Existentialism, became the common response, so that none of us completely escaped the wounds of Existentialism. Neo-orthodoxy followed, as scars developed in the Church. No one escaped this trilogy unscathed: even our hymnals, hymns, and lexicons are infected with this kind of thinking. Not that Existentialism and Neo-orthodoxy were all bad: they were honest attempts of sincere Christians to retain truth against a daunting foe. Other knee-jerk reactions included fundamentalism, and much, much more. Nevertheless, Christianity is a walk in the light, not a leap in the dark. Neither is there a single point of tangency between time and eternity in Christ alone on Pesach 33 AD: for Christ has baptized us into Himself, so that there is a complete continuum of tangency between time and eternity from Adam until the end: there has never been a time when the Triune God has not actively engaged the world, a time when mankind was not completely surrounded by the Eschaton. Or what will we say in response to other evils? Time fails us. We need to recover the Whole…. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I’m pretty sure that this is Alexander Schmemann’s idea, possibly from, *Of Water and the Spirit*, or possibly from, *For the Life of the World*; but, I’ve been unable to locate the reference. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. White, E. B., *Charlotte’s Web*, (Harper and Brothers, 1952) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
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