



THE GREAT COMMISSION AND THE CREATION MANDATE

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The Great Commission as presented in Matthew 28:18-20 is usually read in isolation, not even in the context of this very Gospel itself. When we do not read a text in its immediate and larger contexts we will likely misunderstand it. Among evangelicals Matthew 28:18-20 is often confused with world evangelization, when evangelism is not even mentioned (only implied) in this version of the Great Commission (for the other versions see Mark 16:15; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

The eschatological Kingdom: “already” and “not yet”

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus and traces Him to David. This is crucial to establish His identity as the Messiah, the son of David (Jer 23:5-6) who would come and establish the Kingdom of God to put an end to all human kingdoms (Dan 2:44). Just as Daniel 2:44 anticipated, the Messiah or Christ came at the time of the kingdom of Rome.

So Jesus the Christ came to establish the Kingdom of God. Accordingly, as George Ladd sums it up for us,

the Kingdom of God was the central message of Jesus. Mark introduces Jesus’ mission with the words, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel’” (Mark 1:14-15). Matthew summarizes his ministry with the words, “He went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt 4:23). Luke’s introductory scene does not mention the Kingdom of God but instead quotes a prophecy from Isaiah about the coming of the Kingdom and then relates Jesus’ affirmation, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).¹

What then is the kingdom of God? Neither the Hebrew nor the corresponding Greek word translated “kingdom” in itself refers to a geographical location, as the English term is normally understood today. Both words mean “reign” or “rule.” The kingdom of God then refers to the kingship of God and the realm in which His kingship is realized, where His will is done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). The Old Testament anticipated “a divine visitation to purge the world of evil and sin and to establish God’s perfect reign in the earth.”² Jesus Himself also affirmed the same. For according to Him, “The coming of God’s Kingdom will mean the final and total destruction of the devil and his angels (Matt 25:41), the formation of a redeemed society unmixed with evil (13:36-43), perfected fellowship with God at the messianic feast (Luke 13:28-29).”³

The coming of this (eschatological) Kingdom of God is the same as the establishment of “the new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells,” to which the Church looks forward (2Pet 3:13). The promise of the new heavens and the new earth was first explicitly announced in Isaiah 65 and elaborated in Revelation 21-22. It will be established at the Second Coming of Christ. This is the eschatological salvation that awaits the Church.

If the eschatological Kingdom of God promised in the Old Testament will only be realized in our future how could Jesus have established it in His first coming? The Old Testament did not anticipate two separate comings of the Christ. So it did not foresee a period in history where the promised Kingdom is both “already” (present) and “not yet” (future), and where the eschatological salvation it anticipates could be partially experienced prior to its consummation. But the New Testament clearly teaches that the Kingdom of God is not only future but also present:

There are several texts that speak of entering the Kingdom as a present reality.... [For instance,] Jesus said, “The tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you”—the religious leaders of Israel (Matt 21:31). The most natural interpretation of such passages is of a present situation....

The unforeseen presence of the eschatological salvation is illustrated in many aspects of Jesus’ message and mission and is to be seen far beyond the actual terminology of the Kingdom of God. The mission of Jesus brought ... to people an actual foretaste of the eschatological salvation. Jesus did not promise the forgiveness of sins; he bestowed

it. He did not simply assure people of the future fellowship of the Kingdom; he invited them into fellowship with himself as the bearer of the Kingdom. He did not merely promise them vindication in the day of judgment; he bestowed upon them the status of present righteousness. He not only taught an eschatological deliverance from physical evil; he went about demonstrating the redeeming power of the Kingdom, delivering people from sickness and even death.

This is the meaning of the presence of the Kingdom as a new era of salvation. To receive the Kingdom of God, to submit oneself to God's reign meant to receive the gift of the Kingdom and to enter into the enjoyment of its blessings. The age of fulfillment is present, but the time of consummation still awaits the Age to Come.⁴

It is in the context that the Kingdom of God is both present and future that we are to understand the mission of the Church as taught by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.

The mission of the Church as salt and light

The Church is called to be “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (Matt 5:13-16). As salt was used “for flavoring and the preservation of food,” the Church is “to provide flavor to the world” and “to help prevent its corruption.” In other words, the Church is to have a positive influence on the world “to make the world a better place.”⁵ The “light” is shed through the “good works” of Christ’s disciples by their righteous life as taught in the Sermon on the Mount. It is about submitting to the reign of God by doing His will so that He is glorified in the eyes of the world.⁶ In this way the Church exposes the ugliness of ungodliness and reveals a glorious and blessed way of life. It thus complements the role of the Church as salt.

Hence to be “light” is to bear witness to the Kingdom with respect to our own lives through our own submission to God’s will; and to be “salt” is to bear witness to the Kingdom with respect to the world through influencing them to do God’s will. As the Sermon on the Mount continues, Jesus even taught His disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come,” which means, “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10). This assumes not only a desire to see God’s will done in the disciples’ own lives (“light”) but also in the lives of those within their sphere of influence (“salt”). Having prayed thus, Christ’s disciples are to

“seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (6:33), that is, to make it a priority to live out the prayer.

The failure of the contemporary Church to be “salt” and “light” is lamented by John Stott:

Our Christian habit is to bewail the world's deteriorating standards with an air of rather self-righteous dismay. We criticize its violence, dishonesty, immorality, disregard for human life, and materialistic greed. "The world is going down the drain," we may say with a shrug. But whose fault is it? Who is to blame? Let me put it like this. If the house is dark when night fall comes, there is no sense in blaming the house, for that is what happens when the sun goes down. The question to ask is "Where is the light?" If meat goes bad and becomes inedible, there is no sense in blaming the meat, for that is what happens when bacteria are left alone to breed. The question to ask is "Where is the salt?" Just so, if society deteriorates and standards decline, until it becomes like a dark night or stinking fish, there is no sense in blaming society, for that is what happens when fallen men and women are left to themselves, and human selfishness is unchecked. The question to ask is "Where is the church? Why are the salt and light of Jesus Christ not permeating and changing our society?" It is sheer hypocrisy on our part to raise eyebrows, shrug our shoulders or wring our hands. The Lord Jesus told us to be the world's salt and light. If therefore, darkness and rottenness abound, it is our fault and we must accept the blame.⁷

The eschatological Kingdom and the Great Commission

It is in the context of what the Church and disciples of Christ are called to be and to do that the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations by “going,” “baptizing” and “teaching” them is given. Certainly, in “going” to make disciples, the Gospel must be preached and accepted before the “baptizing” can happen. But the Gospel to be preached is the Gospel of the Kingdom, which is an invitation to repent and believe in Jesus so as to enter the Kingdom of God, thereby having a foretaste of the eschatological salvation. This explains why there is such a focus on “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you,” that is, teaching them to submit to God’s reign by seeking to do His will in every area of their life.

The Great Commission is premised on “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.” This means Christ is already reigning in heaven and on earth. Hence the Great Commission is premised on the presence of the eschatological Kingdom of God. But Christ will not impose His authority on the nations. When disciples, and not just converts, of all nations are made, people of all nations will willingly recognize Christ’s authority and seek to do God’s will. Hence the Great Commission is, in this sense, about seeking God’s Kingdom to “come” to, and hence His will be done in, all nations. Since not everyone will become a disciple, Christ’s reign will not be universally recognized. And since even the disciples of Christ have not yet fully experienced the eschatological salvation, Christ’s reign will not be perfectly recognized. The Great Commission is given with the promise that Christ would be with His disciples even to end of the age. Hence the work of the Great Commission is to continue until He comes back to consummate the Kingdom, where His reign will then be universally and perfectly recognized.

The kingdom of God and the Creation Mandate

Since the Kingdom of God was promised in the Old Testament, we need to understand what the kingdom or reign of God means in that context to fully appreciate the meaning of the Great Commission (note: the Kingdom refers to the eschatological Kingdom, while kingdom refers to kingship or reign in general). In order not to miss anything, we need to go all the way back to the very first commission given to the human race: the Creation Mandate (Gen 1:28).

It was before the Fall and in the Garden of Eden that God blessed Adam and Eve, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Thus the mandate to fill and subdue the earth and rule over the creatures was given when Adam and Eve were in direct fellowship with God and before there was a need for world redemption. This mandate must first be understood in this context before we can relate it to the Great Commission.

When the earth was first created it was “formless and void” and God had to do some major renovation on the earth and the solar system before life on earth was possible. Then he created plant and animal life and finally human life (Genesis 1). God further developed (a small portion of) the earth by planting the

Garden of Eden and placed the first human couple there to “cultivate it and keep it” (2:15).

It is in this context that the Creation Mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill and subdue the earth (outside the Garden of Eden) was given. What did it mean to Adam and Eve?

John Walton in his Genesis commentary explains:

If people were going to fill the earth, we must conclude that they were not intended to stay in the garden in a static situation. Yet moving out of the garden would appear a hardship since land outside the garden was not as hospitable as that inside the garden (otherwise the garden would not be distinguishable). Perhaps, then, we should surmise that people were gradually supposed to extend the garden as they went about subduing and ruling. Extending the garden would extend the food supply as well as extend the sacred space (since that is what the garden represented).⁸

The Garden was a “sacred space” because it was within this space that God dwelled with Adam and Eve. And within this space God’s will was to be done perfectly (“on earth as it is in heaven”). And when they sinned by not submitting to His will they were driven out. In other words, the Garden was where the kingship of God was fully realized, and to expand the Garden by filling and subduing the earth was to expand the kingdom of God. It was thus the pre-Fall version of the command to seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness (Matt 6:33). The Creation Mandate came with the assurance of the availability of food in the Garden (Gen 1:29) just as the command in Matthew 6:33 came with an assurance of the provision of food (and other basic needs) through a promise. The implication in both cases is that the need to “make a living” is no excuse for not fulfilling the mandate or the command to extend God’s kingdom.

But how would the multiplying of human beings and the filling and subduing of the earth actually work out in history?

Albert Wolters has answered it well: When God rested from His work of creation (and renovation) on the seventh day,

this is not the end of the development of creation, however. Although God has withdrawn from the work of creation, he has put an image of himself on the earth with a mandate to continue. The earth had

been completely unformed and empty; in the six-day process of development God had formed it and filled it—but not completely. People must now carry on the work of development; by being fruitful they must fill it even more; by subduing it they must form it even more. Mankind, as God’s representatives on earth, carry on where God left off. But this is now to be a human development of the earth. The human race will fill the earth with its own kind, and it will form the earth for its own kind. From now on the development of the created earth will be societal and cultural in nature. In a single word, the task ahead is civilization.⁹

Thus the Creation Mandate is to develop a civilization that would spread to the whole earth. But what kind of civilization would this be? The first human civilization was that of the ungodly Cain and his descendants. They did build a city and develop agriculture, industry and the arts (Gen 4:17-22). But they did not call upon the name of the LORD (cf. 4:26). And Lamech not only practiced polygamy; he boasted about killing a boy for hitting him and, unlike Cain, had no fear of the consequence (4:23-24). It was a godless civilization that eventually led to the Flood, which destroyed the world except Noah and his family.

The Creation Mandate was given before Adam and Eve sinned by disobeying God. And they were in direct fellowship with Him. So the civilization was intended to be distinctly (but not completely) different from that developed by Cain and his descendants. The difference would not be in the building of the city and the development of agriculture, industry and the arts. All this is part of the mandate to “fill and subdue” the earth. The distinct difference would be that the civilization is developed in obedience to, and in fellowship with, the Creator. Hence, the civilization is to be an expression of the kingdom of God. In other words, the kingdom of God is to be expressed through a civilization. What then is this civilization supposed to be like?

The kingdom of God and the nation of Israel

The book of Exodus gives us a clue. The nation of Israel was called to build a civilization based on obedience to God and in fellowship with Him. Like the Garden of Eden, the Promised Land was a sacred space in which God dwelled with His people through the tabernacle and later the temple. And like Adam and Eve, to remain in this sacred space the nation must obey God. They are to build a civilization based on the Ten Commandments. When the nation failed to do so

but instead followed the ways of her neighbors, and after much chastisement through various calamities and numerous warnings through the prophets, the nation was exiled.

The Ten Commandments constituted what we call the Constitution of the nation. The specific laws in the Old Testament were mostly culture-bound elaborations and applications of these commandments. The various institutions—the state (and the monarchy), the judiciary, the economy, the family, education and the priesthood—are all governed by the relevant laws. This means all the institutions, including the government, answer directly to God by submitting to the Ten Commandments. By studying how the respective laws (in light of their historical and social contexts) were supposed to shape these institutions we can get some idea what the civilization God intended would be like. For instance, the law that required farmers, when harvesting, to leave something behind in their fields for “the alien, the orphan and the widow” to glean (Deut 24:19-21) means, in generic terms, that the economy must somehow cater to the needs of the marginalized. But this is not in the form of free hand-outs—even the widows had to work with their own hands.

The priesthood was needed because this was not the Garden of Eden. Priests were needed to serve in the tabernacle and administer the sacrificial system. The tabernacle and the sacrificial system were needed because human beings are now fallen and cannot keep the Ten Commandments perfectly. The tabernacle provided the setting needed for God to dwell with fallen human beings and the sacrificial system provided the (temporary) means for the Israelites to receive forgiveness of sins (note: all sins are forgiven on the basis of Christ’s death; the sacrificial animals anticipated this ultimate Sacrifice and merely served as “credit cards”).

When Israel failed in her calling in developing a civilization that manifests the kingdom of God it was not because she failed to keep the Ten Commandments perfectly. She failed to repent and seek forgiveness when she violated the commandments. She was stubborn in following the ways of her neighbors.

Israel was to be motivated and thus empowered to keep God’s commandments (and confess, repent and seek forgiveness whenever she fails) by fearing Him for who He is (Deut 10:12-14) and by loving Him for what He has done for her (10:22-11:1). Due to the fallen human nature, only some Israelites but not the nation as a whole were able to do this. The Babylonian Exile showed that a new and additional source of empowerment was needed.

On the eve of the Exile in 586 BC, God promised through Jeremiah and Ezekiel that He would do something new. Ezekiel gives the most details on this new work of God: He will not only cleanse the nation of her sins but will also give her a “new heart” and a “new spirit” as well as “put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (36:25-27). All this is to enable God’s people to keep God’s commandments to fulfill their calling.

The commandments can be summarized to two: to love God with one’s heart, soul and might (Deut 6:5); and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18). Alternatively, they can be summed up as: “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8). It is significant that “to do justice, to love kindness” parallels “love your neighbor as [though your neighbor were] yourself.” For injustice is least obvious at the giving end and most obvious at the receiving end. If we are to do justice we must put ourselves in the shoes of those on the receiving end.

The eschatological Kingdom and the Messiah

Anticipating the Exile, Isaiah had already prophesied in advance that God would “pour out My Spirit on your offspring” (44:3). But Isaiah also revealed that there would be a unique Spirit-anointed Servant who “will bring forth justice to the nations” and who will not be stopped “until He has established justice on the earth” (42:1-3). This Servant is none other than the Messiah or Christ (11:1-16).

As John Oswalt asserts, the Hebrew word translated “justice” is in many ways the antonym of “chaos,” and “it is much more than mere legality, as ‘justice’ has come to connote in English. Rather, it has the idea of ‘right order.’... So Isaiah is saying that the coming Messiah will do all that is necessary to restore God’s right order on the earth.”¹⁰ Isaiah further reveals that this work of the Servant-Messiah involves being “a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6). Oswalt further explains: “‘Salvation’ here corresponds to ‘justice’ in 42:1 and helps to amplify the meaning of ‘justice’ to divine order.... For God to ‘save’ the world means to bring it into the order he intended, and for God to bring about that order it is necessary for him to save it from the bondage sin holds over it.”¹¹

That means the atoning death of the Messiah so vividly described in advance in Isaiah 53 (Isaiah 49-55 must be read as a unit), together with the new work of God through the Holy Spirit prophesied in Ezekiel 36, are the means necessary to bring about “salvation” to all the nations, a salvation that delivers humanity from sin, and as a consequence, from misery as well. For the final outcome of this salvation is that the divine order, or “justice,” will shape every human institution and every human relationship so that the Creation Mandate to develop a civilization that expresses the kingdom of God will be fully realized. So the Spirit of God will not only enable “saved” human beings to do justice and love kindness, but complementing it, will also enable them to influence the world so that the very structure of human institutions is also characterized by justice and kindness.

The Creation Mandate and the mission of the Church

Obviously this is the same salvation that the Church is called to bear witness to, whether as “light” (through loving one another and others) or “salt” (through influencing others). In fact, citing Isaiah 49:6, Paul said “The Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth’” (Acts 13:47), indicating that Christ’s mission to bring “justice-salvation” to the earth has now been given to the Church. Therefore to fulfill the Great Commission is to fulfill the Creation Mandate to develop a civilization in which human relations and human institutions are shaped by justice and kindness and are thus submissive to God’s reign. We need to take a look at the Great Commission in this light.

This Commission is thus obviously much more than evangelizing the world or even “saving souls” and is really about “saving” the world by helping to bring it into the order God intended. Saving souls and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded is only the means to this end. Saved souls have “eternal life” (the emphasis of John’s Gospel) because they have entered the eternal Kingdom of God. Just as the eternal Kingdom is “already” and “not yet” their eternal life is also “already” and “not yet.” The “already” aspect is a foretaste of the “not yet” eschatological salvation in the new heavens and new earth. Thus Christians cannot really talk about eternal life without thinking of the eternal Kingdom.

If Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth, He already has authority over every nation, institution and person. Those in every nation who willingly

respond to the Gospel of the Kingdom are to bear witness to it in and through every area of their life, so that they will make a difference in and to the institutions of which they are a part, whether the family, church, economy, or even the state. In this way they seek to bring their nation into submission to the reign of Christ. Of course this reign will never be universal or perfect until Christ returns. In other words, Christ came to bring “justice-salvation” to the nations; He has left us, but has sent us the Holy Spirit, to continue from where He left off; and He will return to consummate what He and we have been called to do. Ω

NOTES

¹ George Elton Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 54.

² *Ibid*, p. 42

³ *Ibid*, p. 62

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 68, 78.

⁵ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007), p. 174.

⁶ *Ibid*, p.177

⁷ John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today: New perspectives on social & moral dilemmas*, 2nd ed. (London: Marshall Pickering, 1990), p. 67.

⁸ John H. Walton, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 186.

⁹ Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 36.

¹⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The NIV Application Commentary: Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 472.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 547-8.