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The Great Commission and Evangelism in the New Testament

John S. Hammett

One of the most often mentioned distinguishing characteristics of evangelicals is their zeal for evangelism.¹ The most often mentioned motivation to evangelism among evangelicals is the Great Commission. For example, in a small IVP booklet called *Evangelism: Why & How*, John Stott lists “obedience to Christ’s command” as the first of three major motives for evangelism, and gives Matt. 28:19, along with Mark 16:15, as the biblical basis.² Elmer Towns lists nine motives for evangelism, of which the first is “it is commanded by Christ (Mt. 28:19; Mark 16:15).”³ Of five reasons for evangelism given by Bill Bright, first is “Christ has given a clear command to every Christian,” though Bright cites Mark 16:15 rather than the Great Commission.⁴ John Mark Terry also includes the Great Commission as one of five reasons to evangelize, though he does move it to second place (“evangelize to follow Christ’s example” is first, followed by “evangelize to obey the Lord’s command,” citing Mt. 28:19, along with John 20:21 and Acts 1:8).⁵

Examples could be multiplied, from books and sermons, but the point is clear. When most evangelicals are asked, “Why are you so insistent and persistent about evangelism?”, the characteristic response usually begins with the Great Commission and obedience to Christ’s command. This article will examine the Great Commission, Matt. 28:19-20, in the light of the pattern of New Testament evangelism, and suggest that our emphasis on obedience to the Great Commission as the primary motivation for evangelism, while legitimate, may be masking misunderstandings or neglect of other New Testament emphases. In other

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words, I want to show that while the Great Commission is foundational for evangelism, it is also exceptional in the New Testament portrayal of evangelism.

The exceptional nature of the Great Commission can be seen in a number of ways. The breadth of scope in the Great Commission is striking. Nowhere else in the New Testament is there a similar commission from one possessing *all* authority, extending to *all* nations, involving the teaching of *all* things, and enduring for *all* time.

The central verb used in the Great Commission is also exceptional. Verses dealing with evangelism often use words like *euangelizomai*, *kerusso* or even *martureo*, but the verb *matheteuo* is found only four times in the New Testament, and the imperative *matheteusate* only in Matthew 28:19. It is an exceptional command, which presupposes evangelistic activity leading to baptizing but is not exhausted solely by evangelism.

The focus of this article is a third way in which the Great Commission is exceptional. It is indeed an explicit command applicable to all believers. In fact, I can find in the entire New Testament only one verse that contains as clear a command to all believers to be involved in evangelism. That is Mark 16:15, but even it is not as clear as the Great Commission, for it is addressed to the apostles, and does not contain as clear a link to all believers, and it has the textual problem concerning the authenticity of Mark 16:9-20. For most of the remainder of this article I want to contrast the Great Commission with the presentation of evangelism in the rest of the New Testament, to show how exceptional it is, and draw some observations, suggestions and implications from this data for our teaching and practice of evangelism and the entire Christian life.

First of all, we may consider a number of other verses often referred to as commands regarding evangelism, which, while they certainly may and should lead us to involvement in evangelism, are not really commands. For example, Luke and Acts give us two verses that are often cited. Luke 24:46-47 reads "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."⁶ The problem is that the verb translated "will be preached" (*keruxthenai*) is not an imperative, but an aorist infinitive. Nigel Turner's volume on Greek syntax states that it is rare for an infinitive in Greek to indicate a direct command, but that when it

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does, the tense is always present; however, on the same page, he notes that Luke 24:47 may be an exception, where an aorist infinitive has imperatival force.⁷ In any case, it is not a clear and definite command. Rather, it reads more like Christ's explanation of what Scripture said would happen, almost like a prophecy: namely, that Christ would suffer and rise from the dead, and that afterwards, repentance and forgiveness would be proclaimed. The implication of the responsibility of the disciples is clear, particularly in light of v. 48 ("You are witnesses of these things"), but it certainly is not as clear and forceful as the Great Commission in Matthew.

Acts 1:8 is often cited as a command to evangelize, but it is in fact a statement of promise: "You will receive power . . . you will be my witnesses." It is true that in biblical Greek a future tense verb may carry imperatival force, especially when quoting Mosaic law. For example, in Matt. 22:37 *agapeseis* is clearly future tense, but is specifically identified as a commandment, indeed the greatest commandment. But, as Turner notes, when issuing his own commands, Jesus used the imperative.⁸ Moreover, the verse reads very clearly as a promise of a future endowment of power, resulting in a future involvement in witness. Again, the verse has much to say to believers today in relationship to evangelism, but it is not a command.

In fact, in the synoptic gospels as a whole, while evangelism is pervasively present, it is much more described than prescribed. John the Baptist is described, most often as preaching a baptism of repentance (using the verb *kerusso*; see Matt. 3:1, Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3), but once as preaching good news (*euan-gelizomai*; Luke 3:18). The very beginning of the ministry of Jesus was marked by proclamation of the good news (Mark 1:14-15, Luke 4:18), and Matthew's summary statements of Jesus' ministry mention preaching the gospel of the kingdom, along with teaching, and usually, healing (Matt. 4:23, 9:35, 11:1; see similar statements in Mark 1:39, Luke 4:44, 8:1). Jesus himself describes the reason he came as to call sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32), or to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10).

There were, of course, the twelve, who were sent out with an explicit command to preach the gospel (Matt. 10:5-10, Mark 3:14, Luke 9:1-6), and the seventy-two, whose mandate included at least announcing the nearness of the kingdom (Luke 10:1-12). While believers today may be urged to follow the example of these early disciples, there are some problems in using these

verses as clear commands that should motivate us to involvement in evangelism.

First, the evangelism involved here was that of an intense, short-term mission, not that of sharing the gospel in the course of one's daily life. The disciples were to travel from town to town, living off the hospitality of their hearers, then after an unspecified time, return and report to Jesus. This is not the type of evangelism that can be a part of the daily life of most believers. Second, at least some aspects of the mandate Jesus gave to these disciples seem to be conditioned by the historical circumstances of the unique mission of Jesus himself. Thus, the twelve are told to go only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 10:6), or to go ahead of the Lord to the towns where he was about to go (Luke 10:1); they are to perform signs that show the nearness of the kingdom (Matt. 10:8: healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the lepers, driving out demons); they are to go with urgency, not even stopping to greet someone on the road (Luke 10:3-4).

Thus, the commands given to these disciples, while containing some valuable principles regarding evangelism, are difficult to see as a clear mandate for evangelism in the lives of believers today. A clearer basis may be found in the command to follow Jesus (Matt. 4:19, Luke 5:10), but evangelism in these verses is the promised result of the work of Christ, who makes us fishers of men; the command is to follow Him.

More common in the synoptics is the spontaneous proclamation of those healed, sometimes contrary to Jesus' instructions (especially in Mark; see Mark 1:43-45, 7:36, also Matt. 9:30-31). There are two other instances of commands related to evangelism, in a broad sense. The demoniac from whom Jesus cast the legion of demons was told to "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you" (Mark 5:19), and a would-be follower was told to "go and proclaim the kingdom of God," rather than go and bury his father (Luke 9:59-60), but each of these, while carrying implications or principles for evangelistic involvement by believers today, is addressed to an individual in a specific situation.

In short, while evangelism is certainly pervasive in the life and ministry of Jesus, and was part of the mission of certain groups for a certain time, there is nothing in the synoptics resembling the Great Commission in terms of an explicit command for all believers to be about sharing the gospel. There are numerous examples from which principles for evangelism may be

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drawn, but in terms of explicit prescriptive instruction, there is very little.

In the gospel of John, the major evangelistic theme is the idea of witness (found forty-seven times in noun and verb forms). Among those who bear witness to Jesus are John the Baptist (1:7-8), a Samaritan woman (4:39), Jesus' own works (5:36), the Father (5:37, 8:18), and the Scriptures (5:39). The Spirit's witness is spoken of in the future tense (15:26), while the verb used for the apostles' testimony in 15:27 (*martureite*) is probably best seen as imperatival, though its form could also be indicative.

Elsewhere in the gospel of John, evangelism is found mainly in encounters between Jesus and others: Nicodemus (3:1-21), the Samaritan woman (4:5-38), the Jews (5:19-47, 8:12-30, 10:1-19), the crowd (6:26-40), the man born blind (9:35-38). There is one further example from Andrew, who led his brother to Jesus (1:40-41). Depending on one's interpretation of the fruit in John 15:1-16, those verses might be said to relate to evangelism, but even there, the command is to abide in the vine; the result is to be fruit-bearing, whether that be evangelistic or the fruit of Christian character.

Again, while there are certainly principles to be gained from studying Jesus' example of personal evangelism, there are no commands to be about the business of evangelism, with the possible exception of John 15:27, but the witness referred to there seems to be limited to the apostles, for it is linked to their having been with Jesus from the beginning. Evangelistic involvement may be implied in being sent into the world (17:18, 20:21), but it is left implicit. Again, there is no statement resembling Matt. 28:19-20.

The Book of Acts is in many ways the most evangelism filled book of the New Testament. We find *euangelizomai* fifteen times, *kerusso* eight times, *katagello* ten times, *martus* thirteen times, and *dialegomai* ten times, not to mention occasions when the message is said to be declared (2:11), said (3:12), told (5:20), or spoken (16:32). Not all the occurrences of all these words are found in evangelistic contexts, but the overwhelming majority are.

We also find broad involvement. At times whole groups are involved, as the whole group gathered on the day of Pentecost (2:11), or a church body as a whole (4:31, where all "spoke the word of God boldly"), or the apostles as a whole (5:41-42), or all the believers except the apostles (8:1, 4). Numerous individuals

are noted: Peter and John (4:1-3), Stephen (6:8-10), Philip (8:5), Paul (9:20), Barnabas (11:22-25), and others.

Yet in all these descriptions of evangelism, the issue of motivation seldom comes up. There is one verse that seems to refer to the Great Commission (10:42), but the dominant attitude of the witnesses is that of Peter and John: "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (4:20). In fact, at many points Luke seems to deliberately downplay the human element and emphasize the divine actor. Thus, in 2:47, it is the Lord who added to the church those who were being saved. In 9:31 and 16:5, the churches are described as being strengthened (passive) and growing in numbers. There are repeated references in which the word of God is described in active terms, spoken of as spreading, increasing, growing in power (6:7, 12:24, 13:49, 19:20).

There are certainly cases where individuals acted in obedience to divine direction. In fact, there is an interesting sequence in chapters 8-10, where three individuals, Philip, Ananias, and Peter, are commanded to get up and go (the same verbs, *anistemi* and *poreuomai*, are used in each case; see 8:26, 9:11, and 10:20) to specially prepared and recipient individuals (the Ethiopian eunuch, Paul, and Cornelius). However, even in these cases, there is no command to go and share the gospel. As they went where God directed, they found individuals who were searching and found themselves giving God's message to them. In only one case does there seem to be an emphatic command to share the gospel, and that is in the life of Paul.

From the outset, we are told that God's plan for Paul's life is to be a witness, especially before the Gentiles (9:15). He began to preach "at once" (9:20) and continued despite threats that began immediately and continued throughout the book of Acts (9:23, 9:29, 14:5-7, 14:19-20, 20:1-3, 20:22-24, 23:12). He received a reaffirmation of his initial call during his time in Antioch, and began his missionary career with Barnabas (13:2-3). The rest of the book of Acts revolves around the outworking of that call in Paul's life. We see him guided in where he preaches the gospel (16:10), encouraged to continue speaking (18:9), and he himself sees his life as dedicated to "the task the Lord Jesus has given me--the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace" (20:24).

That sense of personal vocation and commission carries over into the Pauline corpus. Of the twenty-two times he uses the verb *euangelizomai*, all but five describe his own preaching of the good news. Of the eighteen times the verb *kerusso* is found, half

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speak of his own preaching or that of he and his companions. He describes himself twice as a *kerux*, or herald (1 Tim. 2:7, 2 Tim. 1:11). He speaks of his personal sense of obligation, eagerness, or compulsion, to share the gospel (Rom. 1:14, 1 Cor. 9:16), and assumes that other believers feel a similar compulsion (2 Cor. 5:14, 18-20). His consistent prayer request involved his own clear presentation of the gospel (Eph. 6:19-20, Phil. 1:19-20, Col. 4:3-4, 2 Thess. 3:1). What is most striking, however, is what is not found in Paul.

While there is commendation for some churches whose faith is widely reported (and thus, we assume, are effectively sharing the gospel; see Rom. 1:8, Col. 1:3-6, 1 Thess. 1:8), there are no churches that Paul chides for a lack of evangelism. In the numerous hortatory sections of his letters, there are no commands given to believers to evangelize, or to witness, or to proclaim the gospel. This is especially striking in passages like Rom. 12:9-21 and 1 Thess. 5:14-22, which overflow with exhortations on a multitude of issues. None deal specifically with evangelism.

There is a similar absence in the qualifications for elders or overseers in 1 Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They must be able to teach, holding to sound doctrine and refuting those who oppose. They must have a good reputation, including among those outside the church, but nothing is said about their evangelistic ability. We do have 2 Tim. 4:2 and 4:5, where Timothy is solemnly charged to “preach the Word,” and “do the work of an evangelist,” and these commands are commonly, and, I think properly, applied to pastors, and relate to evangelism. And there is the instruction concerning the manner in which the Lord’s servant teaches, with gentleness, that others may be led to repentance (2 Tim. 2:24-25). One may also say that Paul expected believers to follow his example in evangelism, as in all other things (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1), and that much of his teaching presupposes evangelistic involvement. For example, in Titus 2 the conduct of various groups within the church seems to be guided by the desire that no one “malign the word of God” because of their conduct, but that, on the contrary, the way they live “will make the teaching about God our Savior attractive” (Titus 2:5, 10).

Yet even when all the possible allowances are made for example, implication, and presupposition, there is still very little in the way of explicit commands in the Pauline corpus concerning evangelism as a matter of obedience for every believer. It seems as if obedience was not the dominant answer to the question,

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why evangelize? In fact, it seems that the question of motivation for evangelism didn't often come up for Paul. He certainly had a clear sense of a personal, divine commission, and even compulsion (1 Cor. 9:16), but it seems he either believed others shared that sense of compulsion, or that further reasons for sharing the gospel seemed too obvious to need mentioning, or, perhaps most likely, that if believers lived as his letters taught them to live, evangelism would inevitably result.

The rest of the New Testament is generally consistent with this pattern. There is a possible idea of evangelism behind James 5:19-20, but it is fairly vague. I Pet. 2:9-10 is perhaps the closest we get to an explicit command, as it gives the reason for our salvation as that of corporately "declaring the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." I Pet. 3:1 gives wives instruction on how to win unbelieving husbands without a word, and 1 Pet. 3:15-16 tells us to all be ready to give a reason for our hope. Jude 22-23 uses language we usually associate with evangelism, and Rev. 22:17 encourages us to join in inviting all who will to come and receive the water of life, but none of these compare in specificity or strength with the Great Commission. Within the pattern of New Testament evangelism it is truly exceptional.

What then should we make of this data? Is the paucity of commands really that important? After all, the Great Commission is there, and there are enough other examples and less emphatic commands to give a clear basis for evangelism, and we certainly don't want to give people an excuse for avoiding evangelism, so what is the value of this study?

I certainly don't want to suggest that evangelism is unimportant or should not be an intentional part of every believer's life. A recent survey of one thousand churches successful in evangelism found a common theme: "intentionality in evangelism."⁹ D.A. Carson emphasizes the importance of intentionality in evangelism, especially for those engaged primarily in ministry to other Christians.¹⁰ Yet there are some observations that I think should be made from the overall pattern of New Testament evangelism.

First, I was impressed by the absolute pervasiveness of evangelism in the New Testament. As a good evangelical, I have always professed the importance of evangelism, but looking through the New Testament with an eye specifically to evangelism was itself eye-opening. The gospels and Acts are full of

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evangelistic encounters, and the churches to which Paul writes are the result of evangelism, often his own, and are themselves often involved in evangelism. Evangelism bursts out, especially following Pentecost, primarily in a spontaneous way, but occasionally as a result of divine commission, as in the case of Paul.

Second, I was struck by Paul's sense of a special call in the matter of evangelism. Of course, evangelism is still a matter of obedience for every believer, but I cannot deny that Paul felt a special sense of commission that he did not seem to expect all other believers to share. Was this related to his apostolic position or his Damascus Road encounter and commission? I think certainly the latter. Apostleship in Paul's writings seems to deal mainly with his authority to guide the churches, not his personal evangelistic zeal and sense of compulsion. That came from his personal commission received from the Lord. The conclusion I draw is that there may still be more of a role and need for specially called evangelists than I, and I suspect many other evangelicals, have thought.

A third and most striking observation from this study is simply that there is a paucity of commands relating to evangelism in the New Testament. There are an abundance of descriptions of evangelism; there are principles to draw from examples; and there are some commands, but surprisingly few.

What are we to make of this evidence? I think the inescapable conclusion is that evangelism *should be* a natural, inherent result in the life of one who has himself been saved, empowered by the Spirit, and is living in a vital relationship with Christ. I think this best explains the post-Pentecost explosion of the church, especially the curious description of the life of the church in Acts 2, in which after describing what the disciples did, Luke adds "and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).¹¹ The implication seems to be that this is the natural result of a properly functioning church. And the lack of commands in Paul's letters, coupled with the multitude of commands regarding other aspects of the Christian life, leads to the implication that evangelism is also the natural result of a properly functioning Christian life.¹²

This leads to a final observation, that the Great Commission and the idea of command are not the most prominent motivations for evangelism in the New Testament. Michael Green notes that the three main evangelistic motives in the first two centuries of the church were a sense of love and gratitude toward God, a

sense of responsibility and stewardship before God the Judge, and a sense of the perilous condition of the lost.¹³ He adds of the first motive, "It is important to stress this prior motive of loving gratitude to God because it is not infrequently assumed that the direct command of Christ to evangelize was the main driving force behind the Christian mission," while, in fact, he notes that the Great Commission "is quoted very little in the writings of the second century,"¹⁴ and is referred to only once in the New Testament itself (Acts 10:42).

I do not think the proper conclusion is to avoid the Great Commission, to not teach that evangelism is a matter of obedience, and to trust that it will all take care of itself. Rather, I think we should conclude that if evangelism is not resulting in the life of a church or believer, something is amiss. And what is amiss will probably not be corrected by just teaching believers of the command to share the gospel with all nations. Thus, any evangelistic program that does not help to develop vital, growing believers to carry it out does not have a good prognosis for success.

What then is the importance of the Great Commission? I would suggest we think of it in three ways. First, the Great Commission assures us that the sense of compulsion we feel to share the gospel is not the result of a psychological desire to confirm that we are right, or to build a personal empire, or to curry favor with God. Rather, it is the natural desire of a child to please the Father, of a servant to please the Master. It is inherent in the new life in Christ. The Great Commission assures us that it is his will, not ours, that directs us to evangelize. Second, it is a prod, reminding us that evangelism, for many of us, must be intentional if it is not to slip, unnoticed, out of our lives. Third, the Great Commission has served, and should continue to serve, as an inspiring challenge to involvement, not just in evangelism, but in all that goes into the making of disciples in all nations.

Thus, while the Great Commission is foundational, it is also exceptional in the overall New Testament portrayal of evangelism. And that larger New Testament portrayal should remind us that that single command, important as it is, cannot carry evangelism by itself. Indeed, the overall New Testament pattern suggests that a lack of evangelism, in a church or believer, may often be a symptom of other problems that can only be corrected by obedience to more common New Testament commands regarding Christian life, growth and character, rather than the excep-

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tional command found in the Great Commission.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, George Marsden, "The Evangelical Denomination" in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), vii–xix; or Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 249.

2. John Stott, *Evangelism: Why & How* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1962), 6. The other two motives listed by Stott are love for Christ's people, among whom he includes unbelievers, who are made by Christ and to whom they belong by right, and jealousy for Christ's name.

3. Elmer Towns, *Evangelism and Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1995), 304–5. Some of the other motives Towns gives are the needs of people for salvation, love for Christ and others, the example of Christ, the obligation as stewards of the gospel, the desire to glorify God, the lack of workers, and the promise of reward.

4. Bill Bright, *Witnessing Without Fear* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993), 38. Bright adds the lostness of those without Christ, the hunger of people around the world for the gospel, the fact that the good news is the greatest gift anyone could ever give to another, and the love of Christ for us and our love for Him, as additional reasons for evangelism.

5. John Mark Terry, *Church Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 6–7. Terry's other reasons for evangelism are to meet the world's need, to imitate the early church, and to follow an inner compulsion.

6. This verse, and others quoted in this article, are from the *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1978).

7. Nigel Turner, "Syntax," vol. 3 of J. H. Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 78, see n. 4.

8. *Ibid.*, 86.

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9. Thom Rainer, "The Great Commission to Reach a New Generation," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (Winter 1997): 40–50.

10. The SBJT Forum: How May 'Non-Evangelists' Fulfill the Great Commission," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (Winter 1997): 72–77.

11. Longenecker notes that "the Lord" appears first in the order of the phrase to emphasize that it is his activity. See R. N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles" in vol. 9, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 291.

12. As Darrell Robinson observes, "Effective sharing flows out of the indwelling presence and Lordship of Christ." See Robinson, *People Sharing Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 2.

13. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 236–55.

14. *Ibid.*, 239.