

April 28, 2019
The Great Omission
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Matthew 28:16-20

[The Commissioning of the Disciples]

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Matthew 28:16-20 still makes me itchy, more so than all the rest of the Bible put together. But it's not the Bible at all – it's me. And it's also church. And I don't know if it even counts as a sermon to explain that, but in case you grew up anything like me (and the fact that you've found your way here suggests that maybe you did), maybe my story will somehow connect with yours and give all of us back what ought to be a joyful text this Sunday after Easter – a text that clarifies and confirms what our lives and our life together are about now, as we step from here into eternity.

Let's pray: *May it be all joy, O God, to know you in your risen-ness. May we treat it as our privilege to love others – knowing you already do, just as you love us. That all we need from you is done. Ours is to live by faith – in kindness, justice and humility, among all people, everywhere. Amen.*

What text is this? What's it called? Does your Bible page have a chapter title? *The Great Commission*. The Great Commission is the church's language for Jesus' charge in Matthew 28 to "go and make disciples." In my white, western, Protestant, evangelical experience, *Great Commission* specifically referred to Jesus' command to tell the gospel to the ends of the earth.

The Baptist world of my teenage and young adult years had *Great Commission campaigns*. The names of two which I will never forget, sadly, were **Bold Mission Thrust** and **Laypeople for Christ**. I asked Ben what the words *bold mission thrust* made him think of. *Combat*, he said, or *space exploration*. In Baptist lingo, it was a plan to tell the gospel in person to every person on the planet by the year 2000. I asked him about *laypeople for Christ*, and he just said, *oh that's really just awful*. That said, nobody did it better than Baptists in the 20th century. Hospitals, schools, food security. And churches, thousands of churches. Millions of new believers the world over.

But that story has a backside, if you will, in which this *same Great Commission language* was used by the church in the west as a front for her collusion with the political and economic powers that invaded, colonized, murdered, enslaved and robbed Africa and the Americas for 400 years. If this sounds too awful to be true, I'll direct you to the Doctrine of Discovery. <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/doctrine-discovery-1493>

The thing about the *Great Commission* – Jesus didn't say it, right? It's not red on your Bible page, is it? If it's there, it's like a chapter heading. Church history doesn't quote the term until about 1650. And then only rarely for 200 more years, when along came an Englishman named James Hudson Taylor. Ever heard of him? He was colorful, apparently. Anybody know what happened in the 1840's that has to do with China? The European opium market opened up. And an 18-year-old Christian man in England heard the Lord tell him to go tell Chinese people about Jesus.

For three years he studied Chinese and rudimentary medicine. At 21 years old, he got on a boat and sailed to China. He stayed 51 years, coming back to England every few years to recruit more missionaries. He was thought shocking for wearing Chinese dress; for growing a pigtail; for refusing to spend his time translating Chinese for English business people and diplomats. He was critical of other missionaries who did, who, in his opinion, spent too much time with white people when they should be with Chinese.

Folks thought it appalling that he sent single women into the interior alone to work. His missionaries were to live on what they were given – never to beg for support from others. He started his own missions organization, which is still operating today. He wrote, *China is not to be won for Christ by quiet, ease-loving men and women. ... The stamp of men and women we need is such as will put Jesus, China, [and] souls first and foremost in everything and at every time— even life itself must be secondary.*

Apparently what made him colorful was Reverend Taylor's conviction that when Jesus said go make disciples of every nation He really did mean GO! The same way Jesus *emptied himself of the things of heaven* to come to us, *he [Taylor] emptied himself of all things English.* “Go!” was not just Go! “Go!” was also “Stay!” Taylor died in China in 1905. He was 72. In between he recruited hundreds of missionaries, established hundreds of mission stations. He never solicited for money, and tens of thousands of people heard the gospel. In his pond, he is very, very famous – like the Underwoods in Korea. I'm attaching a link about him to this sermon, so you can read more: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/missionaries/hudson-taylor.html> .

It's no good regretting – only being better. I wish people like Reverend Taylor were my earliest associations with *the Great Commission*. I wish my earliest understanding of this text in which Jesus is charging his apostles had focused on the scene more than the

chapter title. At most, all a child needs of this text is, *here is Jesus giving the grown-ups one last job before he goes back to heaven.*

But that is not the children's sermon of my childhood. I called my friend Angela to check myself on this, for fear I was overstating it. (You also can judge for yourselves.) *The Great Commission* upon which I was bottle-fed went something like this: *Boys and girls, the eternal destiny of your friends, family, and neighbors is in your hands.* Do I have a witness?

Theologically, that isn't true. Spiritually, it is abusive. When parents poison kids it's called child abuse. When theology poisons people it's called spiritual abuse. It's all trauma. But the thing about trauma is that to the traumatized it's normal. Just like, to a kid who doesn't know different, child abuse is, simply, *home* or *mommy* or *love*. To a baby Believer, whatever his or her age, spiritual trauma is the same thing as *faith*.

Let me see if I can explain it in a story. By the time I was twelve, I was overwhelmed with anxiety about my friends who might be going to hell. Along with my dad. And some neighbors who were devout Catholics, yet claimed to never have heard that Jesus is supposed to be your personal Lord and Savior. Your PLS.

It sort of makes me laugh now, but it was not funny then. It was terrifying. (I might have been a wee bit of a sensitive child.) As I knew it, the Great Commission demanded – DEMANDED – that I tell every person I met that Jesus loved them very much and if they didn't accept him as their PLS, he'd have no choice but to let them go to hell when they died – them and all their loved ones too. He didn't want to, of course. He simply had no choice. At no point in my childhood did my brain say to myself, "That is horrible." Or, "That is stupid." Or, "That doesn't even make any sense." Why? Because I was a kid! And because good grown-ups were saying it – the Pastor and my Sunday School teachers. People who spoke for God.

My brain couldn't say it. But you know what did, ALL THE TIME? My belly. My gut. My nervous system. From the time I was twelve years old, the thought of telling people Jesus would be sad to send them to hell, but he would, made me feel like I was going to throw up and cry at the same time. A response as automatic as yanking my hand off a hot pan. In both cases, my body was telling myself, DON'T DO THAT! YOU'LL HURT YOURSELF! But, of course, that was not the message I got. The message I got was that obviously I didn't love my Jesus or my friends enough to be brave. – I need to hear if this is making sense to anybody.

One time in 7th grade I decided I was not going to be a horrible, terrible person anymore. I was going to tell my friend Joy that Jesus loved her and didn't want her to go to hell. Joy was about as much of a criminal personality as I was in the 7th grade. Neither of our mothers let us wear make-up or go to movies after dark. Nevertheless, her eternal

destiny was at stake – and up to me. Not up to Jesus, mind you – the one who had already died and risen for her; up to me and the cafeteria conversation I had planned. I would tell her on a certain day and lunch time.

I sweated and almost threw up all morning. I had barely started my prepared speech before Joy blurted out, “*Do you want to know if I’m saved?*” “Yes,” I practically panted. “*Oh sure,*” she said, “*way back when I was 8.*” I was hung over for days after. Which happens with trauma. But there was a new feeling too that I wasn’t expecting, that I didn’t understand for a long time. The feeling is *relief*, the sensation that my friend Joy can now be crossed off the list of people who haven’t heard the gospel. Not because she’s saved, but because she had her chance.

I remember a seminary chapel speaker who said that no one deserves to hear the gospel twice until everyone has heard it once. A person could definitely hang a meaningful ministry from that. On the other hand, I can’t shake the sensation that Jesus crossed no one off his list. The sensation that he would be disappointed to see us doing so, racking up the numbers as we go. Which is a whole other rabbit I don’t have time to chase. Back when I was 12 – and 25 – it upset me more to tell someone “*Friend, Jesus loves you enough to send you to hell*” than it did to think that person might actually go to hell. Does that makes sense to anyone here but me? You know why? Because it is a lie. It is a cultivated, well-told lie, told not always for love of the world – *the nations*, to use Jesus’ word – but to pacify our own fear.

Friends, once we know a lie is a lie, telling the lie is worse than the lie. Untold, lies die. Jesus doesn’t send children to hell for their lack of information, information withheld by other children. That’s stupid. If it weren’t stupid, it would be horrible. When my brain didn’t know anything at all, my belly and my nervous system, my soul, my heart of heart of heart, knew that was a lie and begged me not to tell it. Because my soul wants me to be okay, not burned or traumatized. I don’t blame my preachers and my teachers – unless they also knew it was a lie. But the ones who did helped me see it and say so. Nothing, ever, is all just one thing, is it? So much Christian love and ministry has been bequeathed under the *Great Commission* banner. And so much harm.

My mind goes back to Hudson Taylor, the white man in Chinese clothes and a pigtail, who learned to be a midwife when men really didn’t do that kind of thing. Colorful, I tell you. I wonder if he’d say, *Oh, the Great Commission, yes. That is Jesus’ charge to his apostles and disciples just before his ascension, a summary of their three years of apprenticeship overlaid with his own death and resurrection, which they at the time still barely understood. His will for their lives, you see: Do for others what I have done for you. It will terrify you sometimes. Make you crazy. Bring you joy. It will take everything you have and more. I will be with you every single moment. Let us begin.*

Would you pray with me?