

The Great Commission from Calvin to Carey

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Just over two hundred years ago the Baptist, William Carey, after repeated efforts was finally successful in stirring up his fellow Baptists to do something about world missions. He preached, argued, wrote, and eventually went as the first missionary of the newly-formed Baptist Missionary Society. Very soon other similar societies were formed—the London Missionary Society and the Church Missionary Society being the first among many.

It seems an amazing fact that, although the Protestant Reformation had begun nearly three hundred years previously, Protestants by-and-large had not involved themselves in the task of world evangelization. There were exceptions, as we shall see, but in general this remains true.

There were a number of reasons for this, some valid, others less so, but one main reason for Protestant inaction was the widespread view that the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 was fulfilled by the original apostles and did not apply to the church in succeeding generations. Again, there were exceptions, but this was the prevailing view.

The Mainline Reformers

Martin Luther, for example, commenting on Mark's version of the Great Commission (Mark 16:15), says:

That the apostles entered strange houses and preached was because they had a command and were for this purpose appointed, called and sent, namely that they should preach everywhere, as Christ had said, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'. **After that, however, no one again received such a general apostolic command, but every bishop or pastor has his own particular parish** (Emphasis added).¹

Just as a stone thrown into water makes ripples in ever-wider circles until they reach the edge of the pond or lake, so in a similar way the gospel spreads, according to Luther. And, as in the case of the dispersion of the Jerusalem Church following the death of Stephen (Ac. 8:1ff), it is mainly accomplished through persecution.

Martin Bucer, the Strasbourg Reformer is concerned that ministers and elders should 'seek the lost', but by this he means those non-believers who attend the local church. Thus he says:

What Christians in general and the civil authorities neglect to do with respect to seeking the lost lambs, this the elders of the Church shall undertake to make good in every possible way. **And though they do not have an apostolic call and command to go to strange nations**, yet they shall not in their several churches . . . permit anyone who is not associated with the congregation of Christ to be lost in error (Emphasis added).²

Calvin in his comments on Matthew 28 in his *Harmony of the Four Evangelists* says nothing one way or the other on the applicability of the Great Commission to the church of his own day. He merely limits himself to commenting on its meaning and relevance for the apostles. However, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* IV. iii. sect. 4–7 he definitely limits the Great Commission to the apostles. In his view the office of apostle, together with those of prophet and evangelist, is temporary. The office of pastor is permanent but is limited to one congregation. He makes the same point in his commentary on I Corinthians 12:28, again differentiating between temporary offices 'which were designed at the beginning for the founding of the Church . . . and which ceased to exist after a while', and permanent offices, 'which are necessary for the government of the Church'.

For the Lord appointed the apostles, so that they might spread the Gospel throughout the whole world. He did not assign any particular boundaries or parishes to them but wanted them to act as ambassadors for Him, wherever they went, among people of every language and nation. In that respect they differ from the pastors, who are bound, so to speak, to their own churches. For the pastor does not have the mandate to preach the Gospel all the world over, but to look after the church, that has been committed to his charge.³

Protestant Orthodoxy

The theological successors of Luther and Calvin were even stronger in their opposition to the idea of the continuing validity of the Great Commission than the original Reformers. John Gerhard, one of the leading Lutheran theologians in the beginning of the seventeenth century produced a major treatment of the subject, arguing against the continuing validity of the Great Commission and giving a number of reasons why the universal preaching of the gospel is no longer necessary, offering supposed proofs that the apostles had finished the job! In 1651 when the Theological Faculty of Wittenberg were asked for their views on the subject, they gave their 'Opinion' that, firstly, the command to go into all the world was a *personale privilegium* of the apostles, like the gift of miracles, and they had fulfilled it. Secondly, the light of nature means that no man can be excused through ignorance; in addition, through Adam, Noah and the apostles, the gospel had been preached throughout the world.

In 1663 and 1664 a German nobleman, Justinian von Weltz, produced a number of tracts in which he tried to stir up missionary interest among Lutherans, but he was rebuffed in official Lutheran circles. Among other motives for world mission, he appealed to Matthew 28 and sought to show its relevance not only to the apostles but to the church of all ages. Disappointed with the negative response to his ideas, Justinian moved to the Netherlands, and from there sailed to Surinam, the Dutch colony in South America, where he died.

In the next century the Divinity Faculty of Wittenberg denounced advocates of missions as false prophets and in 1722 the hymnologist Neumeister of Hamburg closed his Ascensiontide sermon by giving out the hymn:

'Go out into the world',
The Lord of old did say;
But now: 'Where God has placed thee,
There he would have thee stay!'⁴

Among Reformed theologians, Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, was far stronger against the continuing obligation imposed by the Great Commission than Calvin himself. In 1590 a Dutchman, Adrianus Saravia (1531–1613), from 1582 to 1587 a preacher and professor in Leyden, published a treatise which contained a chapter dealing with missions, showing that the Great Commission applied to the church of all times. Saravia's work provoked Beza's attempted refutation of the permanent validity of the Great Commission. However, Saravia's writings had a considerable influence on other Dutchmen, such as Justus Heurnius (1587–1651) and Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), both of whom wrote on the theology of

missions. Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617–1666), a pupil of Voetius, wrote four works on mission, in which he appealed, among other motives, to the Great Commission. A Czech contemporary of these Dutch writers, who spent his later years in the Netherlands, was Jan Amos Comenius (1592–1670), who had a worldwide vision and was particularly interested in education as a way of uniting all mankind and bringing them to Christian faith. He also believed in the continuing relevance of the missionary command for the church and included missions among the essential activities of a living church.

In general, however, mainline Protestants felt that the Great Commission had been given to the original twelve apostles, who had fulfilled it. The task for present day Christians was to maintain the pure witness of the gospel in the churches already established, not to try to establish new ones!

The Anabaptists

It was the Radical wing of the Reformation, rather than the magisterial Reformers, who, already in the sixteenth century, tried to remind the church of its duty in this matter, but with little success. The early Anabaptists insisted on the obligation imposed on all Christians by the Great Commission and tried to obey it, but they were strongly opposed by leading Reformers such as Bullinger, Bucer and Beza. Menno Simons, Pilgram Marpeck and other first generation leaders often quote Matthew 28 in their writings to justify their own itinerant ministry of preaching and baptizing. They felt that the whole of Europe, Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed, needed to be evangelized and they had plans to do this. However, their systematic persecution by Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed alike made it impossible. We do not know whether they would have extended their mandate to include the pagan world outside Europe but it seems extremely likely.

The Puritans

Among the English Puritans of the seventeenth century, there was some interest in those missions among the North American Indians which John Eliot and the Mayhews had started, and in 1649 the *Society for Propagation of the Gospel in New England* was established by Parliament to support the work. A number of tracts were written by Eliot and others giving information and biblical justification for the work. Interestingly, they did not use the Great Commission to justify the missionary work among the Indians, but appealed rather to passages in the Psalms, Isaiah and Revelation. The major exception to this general

attitude was Richard Baxter (1615–1691) who, in many other areas also, was something of a maverick among his contemporaries. In his voluminous writings Baxter cites the Great Commission a number of times and argues for its permanent validity. He gives various reasons why the Great Commission was not restricted to the apostles, and why it justifies not only the fixed, settled, ministry of those ‘having a special charge of each particular church’, but also ‘unfixed’ ministers ‘who employ themselves in converting infidels, and in an itinerant service of the churches.’ Indeed, he says, ‘unfixed, ambulatory ministers’ are ‘a standing necessity’ in the church. While the work of ‘Discipling Infidells, Baptizing them, and Teaching Disciples’ continues, the office itself continues.⁵ Baxter and Eliot corresponded over many years, and, whereas Eliot felt that his main work was that of pastoring an English-speaking congregation, Baxter encouraged him to give up his pastoral work and devote himself completely to the work of evangelizing the Indians. He cites the Great Commission to justify this.

However, Baxter was an exception in this and the more general understanding of the Great Commission among English Puritans of the seventeenth century is found in one of the standard commentaries, Matthew Poole’s *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* (1683–1685):

Pastors and teachers who succeeded the apostles were not under this obligation [i.e. to go and disciple the nations], but were to be fixed in churches gathered, as we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, and the Epistles of the apostles.⁶

New England

In New England, missionary work among the Indians suffered disastrously in the Indian War of 1675 and it never fully recovered, even though Eliot and others tried to continue the work. Cotton Mather (1663–1721) in his *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) describing John Eliot’s motivation to preach the gospel to the Indians, says ‘I cannot find that any besides the Holy Spirit of God, first moved him to the blessed Work of Evangelizing these perishing Indians’ and speaks of the ‘Charitable Pitty’ in Eliot’s heart at the fact that they were without Christ. He mentions also the Seal of Massachusetts Colony which had ‘A poor Indian having a label going out from his mouth, with a COME OVER AND HELP US’,⁷ but he makes no reference to the words of the Great Commission. However, later in the *Magnalia*, where he reproduces an account of the work among the Indians of Martha’s Vineyard begun in 1643 by Thomas Mayhew Jr. he says,

And having seen so great a Blessing on his Faithful Endeavours in the making known the Name of his

Lord among these Gentiles with indefagitable pains, expecting no Reward but alone from him, who said, *Go teach all Nations: Lo I am with you.*⁸

In a later work, *India Christiana* (1721), Mather explicitly parts company from those who claimed that the apostles had preached the gospel to the whole world making it unnecessary for further missionary work, which seems to indicate his acceptance of the permanent validity of the Great Commission, especially as he gave active support to the work of the Pietist missionaries in Tranquebar. He says,

We cannot be of the Perswasion, that it was done by the Mouth, or near the Age of the Apostles; or that All the World evangelized by them, was much without (i.e. outside) the Bounds of the Roman Empire.⁹

His contemporary (and on some issues his adversary), Solomon Stoddard (1649–1729), became more positive towards missionary work among the Indians in his later years than he had been earlier in his life. In his last published work, Stoddard asked: *QUESTION Whether God is not Angry with the Country for doing so little towards the Conversion of the Indians* (1723). He claimed that, as a result of the failure of ministers to preach the gospel to the heathen Indians, God had sent pestilence and war to ravage New England. He cites the words of Matthew 28: 18–20, and shows that these laid a permanent obligation on the church to bring the gospel to the heathen. Stoddard urged an itinerant ministry among the Indians with a view to evangelizing them.

A decade later, in December 1733, Thomas Prince (1687–1758), an influential Boston minister, preached on the occasion of the ordination of three missionaries to work among the Indians on the borders of New England. According to him, the apostles, in spite of the fact that the Great Commission was given specifically to them, were aided in their work by evangelists, such as Mark, Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Silas and Apollos, because it was impossible for them to evangelize the world by themselves. Disagreeing with the traditional Reformed view he says that the office of evangelist continues, even though that of apostle does not. And so, he says,

’tis therefore a great Mistake, which the Generality of Learned Men have inadvertently fallen into: in supposing that Evangelists, or Ministers to Preach the Gospel, and gather Churches among the Heathen, were an extraordinary sort of Officers, peculiar to the Primitive Ages . . . So long as there are heathens to be Evangelized . . . so long do both the Kingdom of Christ and the Necessities of Men require the Office . . . And the contrary narrow Conception, laying aside those Evangelical Officers

and confining the Christian Ministry to the Pastors or Elders of Particular Churches, has not only a plain, natural Tendency to hinder; but has also doubtless been a principal Mean of hindering the Gospel thro' the World . . . Had this Order of Ministers . . . been constantly kept up and emitted among the Heathen Nations . . . it seems likely that all the Ends of the Earth . . . had long before now been Evangeliz'd, and happily seen the Salvation of God.¹⁰

Further references to the Great Commission appear in other ordination sermons preached by New England ministers of the time, as an increasing number of missionaries were sent to evangelize the North American Indians.

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) in his *History of the Work of Redemption*, a series of sermons preached in 1739, seems to follow the traditional understanding of the Reformers of Matthew 28 in limiting the 'go[ing] forth from one nation to another preaching the gospel in all the world' to the apostles. However, in the 'Blank Bible' which he used in later life to supplement his notebooks on Scripture which he made throughout his ministry, he has a note on Matthew 28 which relates it to the future preaching of the gospel to all nations in the period leading up to the Millennium. It may be that the missionary work among the Indians which occupied much of his time after his move from Northampton to Stockbridge produced a change of understanding. His words are:

All power is given to me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore and teach all nations. I have acquired a right to all mankind. Go therefore and bring 'em home to me. This shows that it was Xs aim to assert his right over mankind that he had acquired by the Labours he went through by eventually bringing all nations into into [sic] his kingdom & therefore inasmuch as this has never been accomplished we may prognose that there is a day remaining in which it will be accomplished ('Blank Bible').

It should also be said that in a number of his writings Edwards gives an integral place to missions in the outworking of God's grand strategy for redemption, especially as part of the hoped-for outpouring of the Spirit which he and many of his Scottish friends prayed for and expected in the not-too-distant future. Edwards also showed his interest in missions by editing the journals of his young friend David Brainerd when his missionary activity among the Indians was cut short by his death at the age of twenty-nine. However, the Great Commission is not mentioned by either Brainerd or Edwards as a motivation for Brainerd's sacrificial activity. His vision was connected more with the Old Testament promises about the extension of Christ's

kingdom throughout the world and with 'hopes of the heathen coming home to Christ'.

The Moravians

Ten years before David Brainerd began his work among the North American Indians, the Renewed Moravian Church in faraway Herrnhut in Germany had begun its unique missionary activity. While orthodox Lutheran clergy were still denying the need for the Church to obey the Great Commission, this small group, which merged together remnants of the ancient Unity of Brethren from Moravia with the vision of a Pietist nobleman Count Zinzendorf, was sending its first missionaries to the West Indies, Greenland and many other places. The experience of revival five years before had provided part of the motivation for mission, but they were also aware of the command of Christ to go to the ends of the earth. In a sermon Zinzendorf preached in Holland in 1746, entitled 'The Foundation of Our Mission to the Heathen', he quotes and paraphrases Christ's words:

Preach the gospel to all creatures, all nations . . . no nation excepted, no people has preference here, no place in which they were born, not their language nor sex.¹¹

Similarly in the same year, when preaching in London on 'The Proper Purpose of the Preaching of the Gospel' he says:

. . . He wants to be looked at and to manifest Himself as the Saviour of all men. 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation' (Mark 16:15); whoever will now believe you, whoever will hold to me, whomever I will please, whoever will come to love me, he shall be saved; he shall be delivered from this present evil world and from the wrath to come and shall enter my rest. This then is the ground and purpose of the preaching of the Gospel plain and clear.¹²

In the same way, when August Gottlieb Spangenberg, Zinzendorf's successor, wrote his *Exposition of Christian Doctrine* in 1779, in which he gave a defence of Moravian missionary work as part of his treatment of theology, he also appeals to the Great Commission for justification of the practice. Spangenberg argues, as Carey does a few years later, that the Commission was not to be limited to the apostles alone but 'that the preaching among the heathen was to continue always'.¹³

English-speaking Advocates of Mission

Carey was certainly inspired by the examples of John Eliot, David Brainerd and the Moravian missionaries as

he tried repeatedly to move his fellow English Baptists to initiate a missionary society to take the gospel to the non-Christian world. It is possible that he was also encouraged by the writings of two English-speaking ministers of his own century, the Scottish Presbyterian, Robert Millar and the English Congregationalist, Philip Doddridge.

Robert Millar of Paisley (1672–1752) has been described as ‘an eighteenth century Latourette’ because of his major work *A History of the Propagation of Christianity and Overthrow of Paganism*, published in 1723, which provides a remarkably complete and balanced account of the history of Christian missions from the apostolic era right up to Millar’s time of writing. In his final chapter he produces ‘a few arguments to excite us to act with holy zeal and concern in promoting the conversion of the heathen’. He quotes a number of Old Testament promises about the Gentiles coming to faith (including Isaiah 54:1–4 which was the text of Carey’s famous sermon). He then argues that though these promises and many others like them have already been fulfilled from the Day of Pentecost up till his own time, ‘yet there is a fuller performance of them to be expected before the end of the world’ because of Jesus’ prophecy in Matthew 24:14 that ‘This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations, and then shall the end come’. Millar comments:

Tho’ this was in part fulfilled by the propagation of the Gospel by the Apostles and Evangelists over the Roman empire, before the end of the Jewish state . . . yet I see no reason why it may not be extended to a further propagation of the Gospel to the remote Heathens in Asia, Africa and America, before the end of time.¹⁴

Indeed, as there is to be a greater and more glorious conversion of the Gentiles in the future after, or at the same time as, the conversion of Israel (Rom. 11:25), every Christian should pray, long for and work to promote such a great work. He then goes on to quote Matthew 28:19–20 to make the point that

This duty of converting the nations, of instructing the ignorant, reclaiming the wandering, and bringing home the strangers to be members of the mystical body of Christ, is in a special manner incumbent upon the Pastors of Christ’s Church. We are obliged to propagate the saving knowledge of Christ among all men so far as we can, and as orderly called by the very words of that commission from which we derive our office.

And this is not something for private individuals to take upon themselves; rather

It may be the work of the gravest Convocations of the Clergy, of Presbyteries, Synods, or national

Assemblies, regularly to send proper persons to labour in this work of *converting the nations*, to encourage them, and to notice their success; which would be of greater importance than most affairs that come under our consideration.

Quite clearly, Millar is extending the Great Commission beyond its normal application to pastors in their parishes to include missionary preaching in the non-Christian world.

In England from 1741, Philip Doddridge, the Congregational minister in Northampton, Carey’s home town, was repeatedly urging the formation of a missionary society and was setting out detailed plans for supporting those who would be sent out. In the ‘academy’ which he ran for the training of non-conformist ministers he hoped that some would go to America as missionaries to the Indians, and for a time he hoped that his own son would be among them, although neither of these hopes came to fruition.

In his *Family Expositor*, a New Testament commentary on which he worked for many years, Doddridge comments on the words of commission of the risen Christ to his disciples and paraphrases Christ’s words to them:

Observe then the extent of your commission; and go forth therefore, not only into Judea, but into all the rest of the world, and proselyte all the nations of the earth to the faith and obedience of my gospel, baptizing them in the awful and venerable name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; . . . behold I am always with you, to support and comfort you, and in some measure at least to succeed your labours; and I will to such purposes as these be with all my faithful ministers who shall succeed you in the work, even to the end of the world.¹⁵

He notes, on the promise of Christ to be always with them even to the end of the world, that

As Christ’s presence with his surviving apostles and other ministers was as necessary after the destruction of Jerusalem as before it, nothing seems more unreasonable than to limit these words by such an interpretation, as to refer them only to that period: nor does it indeed appear that the end of the world, is ever used in any other than the most extensive sense.¹⁶

Although his words are not completely unambiguous, it seems that Doddridge is here affirming the permanent validity of the Great Commission.

It seems certain, therefore, that when in 1792 William Carey issued his famous Enquiry, the ground had already been prepared in a number of ways. This does not minimize the significance of Carey’s work; it

rather shows the providential preparation that led up to it. Similarly, the British churches were just beginning to experience a significant new movement of the Holy Spirit in what is usually referred to as the Second Great Awakening. This provided the spiritual dynamic which was, and always is, necessary for the people of God to respond to his Word.

Footnotes

1. M. Luther, *D Martin Luthers Werke*, (Weimar, 1897) vol. 31, pp. 210–211 (cited in H. Boer *Pentecost and Missions*, [London, 1961]).

2. M. Bucer, *Von der waren Seelsorge*, (Strasbourg, 1538), p. 46 (cited in Boer, 1961, pp. 19–20).

3. J. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels* 3 vols ed. D. W. & T.P.F. Torrance, (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1966), III pp. 270–271.

4. Cited by A. J. Lewis *Zinzendorf the Ecumenical Pioneer* (London: SCM, 1962), p. 78, from A. L. Drummond, *German Protestantism since Luther*.

5. S. Rooy, *The Theology of Missions in the Puritan Tradition*, (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, (1965), p. 99, citing Manuscript Treatises.

6. M. Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible* 3 vols (London: 1683–1685), III p. 146.

7. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*,

(London, 1702; reprint Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), vol. 1, pp. 556–7.

8. *Ibid.* Vol. 2, p. 429.

9. Cotton Mather, *India Christiana* (Boston, 1721), p. 25.

10. R. P. Beaver, *Pioneers in Mission: The Early Missionary Ordination Sermons, Charges, and Instructions* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 70.

11. Cited in D. A. Schattschneider 'Souls for the Lamb': *A Theology for the Christian Mission According to Count Nicolaus Ludwig Von Zinzendorf and Bishop Augustus Gottlieb Spangenberg* (Chicago Divinity School for PhD Thesis, 1975), p. 66.

12. N. L. Zinzendorf, *Nine Public Lectures on Important Subjects in Religion Preached in Fetter Lane Chapel in London in the Year 1746* tr & ed G. W. Forell (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1973), p. 32.

13. A. G. Spangenberg, *An Exposition of Christian Doctrine, as Taught in the Protestant Church of the United Brethren, or Unitas Fratrum* (1779, eng.tr. B LaTrobe, London: Moravian Bookroom, 1796), pp. 423–425.

14. R. Millar, *The History of the Propagation of Christianity, and the Overthrow of Paganism*. 2 Vols. 3rd edn. (London: A. Millar, 1731), pP. 393–394.

15. P. Doddridge, *Family Expositor* 8 vols (London 1739–1756, reprinted 1804), vol. VII, p. 486.

16. *Ibid.*