

THE GREAT COMMISSION AND THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD: REFLECTIONS HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY ON RELATIONS AND PRIORITIES (FINLAYSON MEMORIAL LECTURE, 2007)

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The last three verses of Matthew's Gospel have enjoyed an honoured place in the era of Protestant missions from the time of William Carey at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today they are commonly known as 'the Great Commission'. When they were first so described and, more significantly, when that designation became standard usage are questions which cannot yet be answered with any confidence. Occasionally writers have supplied over-confident answers to the second question, but for the present, pending more exhaustive research, a provisional judgement must suffice: it was not until the last decades of the nineteenth century, or even perhaps the earliest years of the twentieth, that Matthew 28:18-20 came to be conventionally referred to as 'the Great Commission'.¹

Despite the importance assigned to this short passage during the last two centuries, no extended investigation of the history of its exegesis has yet been carried out. What makes this all the more remarkable is the well-known fact that not until the new initiatives of William Carey's generation was it liberated from seriously restrictive interpretations, which all in effect denied its applicability as a dominical mandate for universal mission to the Christian church as a whole from the age of the apostles onwards. This much is set forth, sometimes with an exaggerated

¹ This provisional conclusion has been reached with the assistance of Dr Brian Stanley of the Henry Martyn Centre, Westminster College, Cambridge. For a discussion of the issue, see the Appendix to this article. For premature judgements cf. Rose Dowsett, *The Great Commission* (London, Grand Rapids, MI, 2001), 19, 'For centuries, the church has known the concluding verses of Matthew's Gospel as "the Great Commission"'; Abraham Friesen, *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, 1998), 137 n. 1, 'The term "Great Commission" was an appellation given to the command of Christ, in Matthew 28:18-20... by the great missionary movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.' Modern writers have frequently applied the phrase to uses made of all or part of these verses throughout the centuries of the church's history.

sharpness, in any number of brief surveys.² But this widely accepted and oft repeated summary account, with its obvious prima-facie bearing on the equally remarkable story of the failure of most of the Reformation to espouse the cause of world mission (to speak in general terms, without factoring in various qualifications), has not provoked the kind of rigorous historical enquiry into the reception of these Matthaean verses that they deserve. The discipline of the history of biblical interpretation is burgeoning, and there is scope here for more than one viable Ph.D. topic. The subject area should have a natural appeal to the students and scholars of the evangelical constituency, which among Protestants is increasingly distinguished by its commitment to a universal gospel mission. Why has the Great Commission for most of the church's first two millennia been anything other than its modern title suggests?

THE GREAT COMMISSION'S UNIQUE AUTHORITY

First, however, it is worth asking whether Matthew 28:18-20 merits its grand designation. Jesus himself may have left us a clear identification of the two 'great commandments' (Mark 12:28-31, Matt. 22:34-40), but on the whole Christians have not gone in for honorific rather than descriptive titles of particular passages of Scripture. Yet good grounds can be advanced for recognising the uniquely authoritative character of this instruction by the risen Jesus to his followers. This does not entail downplaying the significance of other comparable commissioning statements near the ends of other Gospels, namely Luke 24:45-50 together with Acts 1:4-8, and the more diffused and less clearly worldwide note in John, with a special focus in 20:19-23.³

² For a useful if limited recent account see David Paul Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants: How 2000 Years of Biblical Interpretation Can Shed New Light on Old Texts* (Milton Keynes, 2006), 121-46. See also the early chapters in Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Time*, transl. George Robson (Edinburgh, London, 1901), Johannes van den Berg, *Constrained by Jesus' Love. An Inquiry into the Motives of the Missionary Awakening in Great Britain in the Period between 1698 and 1815* (Kampen, 1956), and Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (London, 1961); David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World. The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (London, 1980), chs 10-14; W. R. Hogg, 'The Rise of Protestant Missionary Concern, 1517-1914' in Gerald H. Anderson (ed.), *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (London, 1961), 95-111.

³ On the range of missiological positions in the New Testament, see Johannes Nissen, *New Testament Mission: Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*, 3rd edit. (Frankfurt am Main, New York, 2004).

For our present exercise any of the endings to Mark's Gospel beyond verse 8 of chapter 16 must be discounted, but in considering the historical fortunes of the Matthaean Great Commission we must remember that all the Bibles of the Reformation era made no differentiation between 16:1-8 and 16:9-20 (the so-called Longer Ending), and the Authorised (King James) Version likewise. The New Testament of the Revised Version, published in 1881, was the first in English to introduce a space between verses 8 and 9, with a footnote pointing to the textual evidence for the omission of verses 9-20.⁴ Consequently, until the later nineteenth century, Mark 16:15-17 was often conflated with Matthew 28:18-20, sometimes as together constituting the apostles' or the church's mandate for world mission, or treated as two versions of that mandate. The Marcan passage raised issues not glimpsed by the Matthaean, such as miracles attendant upon conversion, or not posed so sharply by the Matthaean, such as the relation between faith, baptism and salvation. One shrewd Anglican writer claimed that Mark suited a missionary church better than Matthew, where baptism preceded teaching, which must envisage the practice of infant baptism! He might also have drawn attention to the greater prominence given to creation-wide proclamation in Mark 16:15 compared with Matthew 28:19a.⁵

The long life of the Longer Ending of Mark's Gospel probably helped to delay the recognition of Matthew 28:18-20 as 'the Great Commission' without parallel. It is the argument of this lecture that it warrants that singular designation, for several reasons:

- its position, at the conclusion of its Gospel, and that regarded as the most Jewish of the Gospels;
- its context between the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus;

⁴ The influential text of the Greek New Testament established by Westcott and Hort placed the passage in square brackets, and justified this treatment at length: B. F. Westcott and F. J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, 2 vols (Cambridge, London, 1881), vol. 2: *Introduction, Appendix, 'Appendix'*, 28-51.

⁵ Edward Meyrick Goulburn, *The Great Commission: Meditations on Home and Foreign Missions* (London, Oxford, Cambridge, 1872), 36: The 'Blessed Lord Jesus' had the foresight that the church by the Spirit would rightly interpret his mind about baptizing infants. 'Thou didst, in this great Commission, adjust Thy words exactly to the case of settled Churches, in which Baptism must always precede "teaching".' Cf. also 3: 'St. Mark's version is more purely missionary.' Goulburn was Dean of Norwich.

- its authority-rich setting, with the core commission of verses 19-20a preceded by ‘All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me’ (v. 18) and followed by ‘Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age’ (v. 20b);
- its clarity and directness;
- its inclusion of the Trinitarian baptismal formula;
- its explicitly dominical status.

No attempt is made here to deal with critical issues, for example, about the relation of these verses to the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus. As a believing Christian and member of the church which has received the Scriptures from its Lord, for me they stand in Holy Scripture bearing the authority of the risen Jesus Christ. The position assumed by this paper is as follows:

The Great Commission is the single most important statement of commissioning of the Christian church, from the risen Christ. In terms of what the church should be doing, the New Testament contains no other passage of comparable significance.

WHAT THE COMMISSION COMMANDS

It remains to spell out what the Great Commission commands, not with a detailed exegesis, but with a view to highlighting its dimensions as a whole and the articulation of its parts.⁶ It is issued in the universal authority of Jesus that encompasses heaven as well as earth. The theme of his universal lordship consequent upon the completion of his earthly work is found on a number of occasions elsewhere, for example Acts 2:36, 39 and 17:30-31 and Philippians 2:9-11. His cosmic sovereignty makes the Commission inescapable for his servants, and at the same time renders its worldwide scope – ‘all the nations’ – feasible.

The central instruction of the Commission is ‘Make disciples of all nations’, as the sole Greek imperative is now almost always translated (the AV/KJV had ‘teach’). All the other verbs, ‘going, baptizing, teaching’, are participles. Those translations which make ‘going’ into an

⁶ In addition to the commentaries mention may be made of Dowsett, *Great Commission*; Karl Barth, ‘An Exegetical Study of Matthew 28:16-20’, in Anderson (ed.) *Theology*, 55-71; Bosch, *Witness*, 66-70; Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission* (Leicester, 2003), 172-90.

imperative, or even connect 'all nations' to it as an indirect object (for example, the Contemporary English Version, 'Go to the people of all nations and make them my disciples', and similarly the Revised English Bible), probably inflate its significance, although experts in the Greek of the New Testament seem not to be agreed on the point.⁷ The key element is making disciples of people throughout the world. What is ordered here is not universal coverage in some token sense or in presence only or as a goal in itself, but travel with the aim of making disciples. In Matthew of all the Gospels the Great Commission's fulfilment must entail extension to the gentile nations.⁸

The central accentuation of 'make disciples' means that taking the Commission seriously will require investigating what that task involved in the teaching and activity of Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel in the first instance. For the present we note that it will certainly include 'baptizing' and 'teaching', according to the two dependent present participles in verses 19-20. Both are integrally part of or consequent upon 'making disciples'.

The specification of baptizing those who have been made disciples or are being made disciples may appear surprising or problematic to many readers of this journal, partly because of the low view of baptism prevalent among many evangelicals and partly because infant baptism may seem not to be accommodated by the implied sequence of baptizing those who are already disciples or in the process of becoming disciples. We may well feel more at home in 1 Corinthians 1, where Paul says with some recognisable relief that Christ sent him not to baptize but to proclaim the gospel and almost rejoices in having baptized only a handful of the Corinthian believers (vv. 14-17). The party divisions at Corinth help to explain Paul's comments but do not justify our playing them off against Matthew 28:19. There is no evidence that Paul was exempt from any part of the Great Commission, and implications sometimes drawn from his words – to the effect that baptism does not rate very highly in Pauline terms – fly in the face of the rest of the New Testament's witness to baptism.

So disciples are to be baptized, that is, into the church. There is thus a strongly ecclesial dimension to the making of disciples. Just as being a disciple and being baptized belong inseparably together, so too do being a disciple and being a living member of the church.

⁷ Bosch, *Witness*, 69, citing Adolf Schlatter, suggests the participle is 'in a certain sense pleonastic and could even have been omitted. The crossing of geographical frontiers is no key idea here.' This issue will be touched on later in this paper.

⁸ Cf. also Matthew 26:13 for the assumption of gospel publication throughout the world, but not as a necessary prelude to the end, as in Matthew 24:14.

In addition to baptizing in the name of the Trinity, making disciples also involves teaching issuing in obedience: 'teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you', says Jesus. This seems to envisage a special place for the teaching of the New Testament Gospels in the worldwide Christian mission. It might appear outrageous to think otherwise, but some of us have by habit and perhaps conviction been more often Paul people than Gospel people, or at least more Johannine than Synoptic (Matthew, Mark and Luke) people. Whatever curriculum or scheme is followed in planning instruction or preaching, the four Gospels must have a central place.

The sequence, then, is making disciples, to be pursued in all nations, which encompasses or leads on to baptizing and teaching. Questions of timing inevitably arise. Baptism is momentary, as a person moves from being unbaptized to being one of the baptized in a few minutes. Teaching may presumably be lifelong, even if there is a special focus on catechesis around being discipled and baptized. The aorist imperative translated as 'make disciples' is most likely neither as momentary as baptism nor as potentially long-lasting as teaching.

Finally, the whole of the Great Commission is to be carried out in the assurance of the presence of the risen Jesus Christ with the apostles and the church until 'the end of the age'. As Karl Barth put it, 'Because of Jesus' presence, the sum and substance of our text, the Great Commission of the risen Lord to baptize and to evangelise is valid throughout the days of this "last" age.'⁹ Do we need to be recalled to Barth's simple summary? The Great Commission has not been withdrawn or lifted. Its implementation may have been made more difficult by massive geo-political and cultural shifts and by the resurgence of other world religions, but it remains in force. The church of Jesus Christ abides under commission from its Lord to make disciples of all nations.

David Bosch's summary is worth quoting at length:

[I]t remains undeniable that we... have to do with a mandate which, on the basis of Jesus' authority here and now ('in heaven and on earth', v. 18) is instructing the disciples that a totally new era has been inaugurated which implies their involvement in a world-wide mission....

God does not send 'ideas' or 'eternal truths' to the nations. He sends people, historical beings. He incarnates himself in his Son, and through his Son in his disciples. God becomes history, specific history, mundane history, in the followers of Jesus en route to the world.¹⁰

⁹ Barth, 'Exegetical Study', 71.

¹⁰ Bosch, *Witness*, 68, 70. Cf. Harry R. Boer, *Pentecost and Missions* (London, 1961), 122.

NEGLECT OF THE COMMISSION: FATHERS AND REFORMERS

In view of all this, in the light of the supreme significance of what we so familiarly call 'the Great Commission', it is astonishing that a respected modern book on the subject, Harry R. Boer's *Pentecost and Missions* (1961), is able to write of 'the apparently complete absence of this motivation [of the Great Commission] as a conscious factor in the missionary life of the early Church.... In the conception of the Reformers and of the majority of seventeenth-century theologians the Great Commission was binding *only* on the apostles.... It does not extend to the Church which the apostles founded.'¹¹ A slight measure of overstatement may be present in Boer's judgements, but they are sufficiently close to the mark, if such limited enquiries as have been conducted so far are reliable, to be truly shocking. This does not mean that the church of the long pre-Carey centuries did not engage in missionary extension, but our subject is not the general one of missionary motivation but the interpretation of Matthew 28:18-20. Certainly when one Adrian Saravia (of whom more later) in the late sixteenth century published a reading of this passage which the post-Carey world would instinctively recognise as its own, it was all but unknown to his contemporaries and he met with little but open hostility.

The church of the early Fathers was undoubtedly active and remarkably successful in mission and expansion,¹² but the broad picture is of disjunction between fruitful activity and halting, incoherent or even absent theory.¹³ Some writers like Tertullian, Eusebius of Caesarea (an

¹¹ Boer, *Pentecost and Missions*, 15, 18.

¹² See Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

¹³ Parris, *Reading the Bible*, 122-8, is a useful introduction, but gives only selected references. He exaggerates (127-8) the attention paid to Matthew 28 by Pope Gregory I, whose commitment to the preaching of the gospel to every creature favoured Mark 16 with its 'signs following'; one of his *Forty Homilies on the Gospels*, II:29, is based on Mark 16:14-20. See further A. V. Seumois, *La Papauté et les missions au cours des six premiers siècles* (Paris, Louvain, 1951), esp. 84-5, and W. H. Fritze, 'Universalis gentium confessio. Formeln, Trager und Wege universalmissionarischen Denkens im 7. Jahrhundert', in *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 3 (1969), 98-130, at 108-11. As these studies make clear, Gregory was so instinctively an allegoriser that he could ground a universal commission on a very wide range of Scripture. Further patristic references can be gathered from Harold Smith, *Ante-Nicene Exegesis of the Gospels*, 6 vols (Translations of Christian Literature ser. 6; London, New York, 1925-1929), vol. 6, 145-55; L. B. Smith, 'The Contribution of Hadrian a Saravia to the Doctrine of the Nature of the Church and its Mission: An Examination of his Doctrine as related to that of his Anglican Contemporaries' (Unpubl. Ph.D. diss., Edinburgh University, 1965), 237-43;

important witness later for Saravia), John Chrysostom and Gregory the Great showed greater awareness that Christ in Matthew 28 commissioned his church to be universally missionary in every age, but no central appeal to the Commission emerges with any clarity from the corpus of the mainstream Fathers as a whole. At least, this is the picture so far available from limited scholarly literature. It is perhaps not surprising that some patristic writers express the conviction that the mandate first delivered to the apostles had indeed been fulfilled in the apostolic generation. Statements within the New Testament itself may have encouraged this confidence, such as Romans 10:18 ('to the ends of the world') and Colossians 1:6 ('all over the world') and 1:23 ('has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven').¹⁴

One thing is clear from any foray into patristic citations of these Matthaean verses, as it is later with Reformation writings. Elements in them are cited repeatedly on other issues than the core mandate to make disciples. Among the Fathers, for example, in Athanasius and Basil the Great, it is chiefly Christological and Trinitarian controversies that elicit appeals to one or other verse. The only monograph devoted solely to use made of them in any period of church history is wholly given to vindicating the Trinitarian text of Matthew 28:19 with reference to texts from Eusebius which appear to count against it.¹⁵

The later patristic period in the West witnessed an accelerating tendency to channel the role and authority of the apostles, the original recipients of the Great Commission, into the episcopate and the papacy. In the central middle ages this would even give rise to the notion of an 'apostolic church' differentiated from the rest of the church. In time these developments would exercise a damaging restrictive influence on interpretations of the last verses of Matthew.

The problematic question of the subdued, if not altogether silent, motif of a mission to all nations among the sixteenth-century Reformers has attracted frequent comment, for obvious reasons. Yet bewilderment why those mighty theologians and preachers who took their stand on the supreme authority of Scripture were less than clear-minded about the imperative of world evangelization has not issued in a thesis or monograph

Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. James Moffatt, 2 vols (London, New York, 1904), vol. II, 147-82. But the need for a comprehensive research investigation remains.

¹⁴ Cf. also Rom. 1: 8; 1 Thess. 1: 8.

¹⁵ Bernard Henry Cuneo, *The Lord's Command to Baptize. An Historico-Critical Investigation with Special Reference to the Works of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Catholic University of America, New Testament Studies V; Washington, DC, 1923).

on their understanding of Matthew 28:18-20, nor indeed, to the best of my knowledge, any study of any single Reformer's position. Nor is this the place to attempt more than some review, mostly in general terms.

As earlier, these verses were grist to other Reformation controversies, especially over Christology, chiefly raised by disputes about the presence of Christ in the Lord's supper, and baptism. Thus all of the references to them in the Lutheran *Book of Concord*, which assembles all the Lutheran confessional texts from the Augsburg Confession of 1530 to the Formula of Concord itself (1580), bear on one or other of these issues. Verse 19a, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations', is not cited once.¹⁶ The Anabaptist challenge to infant baptism brought the baptismal instruction in the Great Commission into play. The difficulty was sharpened by the unquestioned inclusion in all sixteenth-century Bibles of the Longer Ending of Mark with the much more explicit Mark 16:16, 'The one who believes [in response to the good news proclaimed in all the world] and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.' But the challenge to paedobaptism was clear enough in Matthew 28, which on a natural reading taught that baptism was for those who had been made disciples. It has even been argued, quite improbably on my evaluation of the evidence, that the original inspiration for what became the Anabaptist insistence on baptism for believers only derived from Erasmus's radical reflections on the apparent ineffectiveness of infant baptism, which came to crisp focus in his comments on Matthew 28:18-20 and the baptisms in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁷

¹⁶ Theodore G. Tappert (transl. and ed.), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia, 1959).

¹⁷ This is the core thesis of Abraham Friesen's *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, 1998). (This book's title illustrates the tendency to anachronistic use of 'the Great Commission' identified earlier. Friesen's interest is confined almost entirely to the baptismal limb of the mandate, scarcely touching on Erasmus's concern for world mission – on which see further below – or the Anabaptists' professed commitment, virtually unparalleled in the Protestant Reformation, to the very heart of the Commission.) A key text for Friesen is what he calls Erasmus's preface to the third edition of his Latin New Testament of 1522, following the translation of it given by Robert M. Adams (ed.), *Erasmus, Praise of Folly and Other Writings* (New York, London, 1989), 117-18, 127-41. Adams builds quite a case on this preface's position in the third in the series of editions of Erasmus's new Latin translation of the New Testament, for which he supplied in justification his more celebrated Greek text. Adams claims this preface took over from the *Paraclesis* of the earlier editions. He is, however, thoroughly confused. The preface in question appears not in any of Erasmus's editions of the New Testament (in which the *Paraclesis* remains in place throughout),

Hence part of these verses and their counterpart in Mark 16 had to be confronted by mainstream Reformers in the refutation of Anabaptist radicalism. They did so in various ways. Luther characteristically met the challenge head on. ‘Baptizing all the nations’ included everybody without exception. Infants were not excluded. In any case, if faith were a requisite for baptism, Scripture threw up lots of examples of babies in and out of the womb who displayed the beginnings of faith – infant faith for infant baptism, as it were.

The Reformed wing generally followed the more tempered response of Calvin, who simply pointed out that the restriction of baptism to those who became disciples applied only to those capable of becoming disciples and could not debar young children. The precedent of covenantal circumcision provided sufficient warrant for baptizing the new-born. This line of reasoning survived with enhanced force into the theological fathers of the nineteenth-century Free Church of Scotland like William Cunningham and James Bannerman, as well as into the massive systematics and apologetics of B. B. Warfield. They were all quite convinced that the Great Commission need only mandate the new, that is, taking the gospel to the gentile peoples and their conversion-baptism. Infant baptism stood solely under the continuity of the Abrahamic covenant, and was truly the Christian form of circumcision. Cunningham and Bannerman could write in so many words of ‘adult baptism as affording the proper fundamental type of the ordinance’ (Cunningham) and of ‘The Bible model of Baptism [as] adult baptism, and not infant’ (Bannerman).¹⁸ Such treatment of the baptismal clause in the Matthaean Commission must have contributed significantly to the marginalization of the Commission in the churches of the old Christendom which in practice knew almost exclusively infant baptism, just as the relish with which the Anabaptists owned the Great Commission as a whole goes some way to explaining the central Reformers’ apparent reluctance to make much of it.

but as an additional preface in his *Paraphrase on St Matthew* (1522), after the preface proper addressed to Charles V; Erasmus, *Opera Omnia*, ed. J. Le Clerc, 10 vols (Leiden, 1703-1706), vol. 7 (1706), ff. **2v-**4v. It is here that Erasmus recommends a ceremony whereby those once infant-baptized would joyfully before the world make the equivalent of a baptismal renunciation and profession in self-dedication – a proposal he immediately recognised as sounding like rebaptism (*videatur iterari baptismus*; Le Clerc, vol. 7, f. **3v, Adams, 136).

¹⁸ For references see David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Milton Keynes, 2007), xxxv-xl. On the argument of the last two paragraphs, *ibid.*, 226-37, 349-56.

A search of Calvin's *Institutes* throws up interesting results. Most references to the Matthaean text have to do with baptism, the eucharist, Christology, Trinity and the ascension. It also attests the perpetuity of the church to the end of the world; greater concern is shown with extension in time than in space. Calvin evinces a tendency to collapse the Great Commission into the twofold ministry of preaching and sacraments (cf. *Inst.* 4:3:6). He rejects the Catholic claim that the promise of verse 20 was given only to the church as a whole, insisting that it belonged to the Twelve individually as much as corporately, 'as well as to other disciples, either those he had already received or who would after be added' (4:8:11). But he falls short of binding the promise to a universal mission, although once, after affirming the apostles' remit in terms of Mark 16:15 to spread the gospel and plant churches everywhere among all nations (cf. Rom. 15:19-20), he admits that 'the Lord has sometimes at a later period raised up apostles, or at least evangelists in their place, as has happened in our own day' (4:3:4). He means Luther and other fellow-Reformers.

If, as is certainly the case, this meagre harvest from the *Institutes* is far from exhausting what Calvin believed and practised in missionary outreach,¹⁹ nevertheless we still search in vain for a clarion unambiguous charter for world evangelization. This is barely offered even in his commentary on the Harmony of the Synoptic Gospels. Verses from the three Gospels are intercalated, so that none receives single focus. The apostles' office 'to lead all nations into the obedience of faith by publishing the gospel everywhere' is opposed to false papal claims of sole succession to the apostles. 'Making disciples of all nations' demolishes the wall between gentiles and Jews; 'the Lord orders the ministers of the gospel to go far out to scatter the teaching of salvation throughout all the regions of

¹⁹ In a series of essays Peter Wilcox has expounded the expansive understanding of 'the progress of the kingdom of God' by evangelization found in Calvin's Old Testament expositions; cf., for example, 'Evangelization in the Thought and Practice of John Calvin' in *Anvil* 12 (1995), 201-17. The so-called 'First Protestant Missionary Effort' consisted of a group of French Protestant pastors sent from Geneva by Calvin in 1556 to a short-lived French colony near Rio de Janeiro; cf. Amy Glassner Gordon, 'The First Protestant Missionary Effort: Why did it Fail?', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8 (1984), 12-18; R. P. Beaver, 'The Genevan Mission to Brazil' in J. H. Bratt (ed.), *The Heritage of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1973), 55-73. On the highly developed training of missionary pastors for France overseen by Calvin and the Genevan pastors see Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563* (Geneva, 1956).

the earth'. Calvin tends to collapse 'making disciples' into teaching, and there is a stronger emphasis on extension in time than in space.²⁰

Perhaps the most eloquent plea in the sixteenth century for worldwide evangelization came from Erasmus, the year before his death, in *Ecclesiastes*, commonly translated as 'The Preacher'.²¹ It appeals earnestly for Christian teachers to gird themselves for the fight of the gospel in Asia and Africa, for fervent prayer that the Lord would thrust out workers into these harvest fields (cf. Matt. 9:38, Erasmus's favourite biblical text in this context), and for Franciscans and Dominicans to exchange their soft comforts for apostolic simplicity and self-denial, knowing that they would always face the cross in bearing its message.²² Surprisingly, the Great Commission seems not to have been among his biblical arsenal in this exceptional piece of highly rhetorical missionary exhortation.

It was among the Radicals that the clearest commitment to the Great Commission was to be found in the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. As the distinguished historian of Anabaptism, Franklin Littell, has stated:

According to Anabaptist understanding of right faith, the Great Commission was fundamental to individual witness and to the ordered community of believers as well. The proof text appeared repeatedly in Anabaptist sermons and apologetic writings. Confessions of faith and court testimonies gave it a central place, and the series of questions prepared by various authorities for

²⁰ A. W. Morrison (tr.), *Calvin's Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. III (Edinburgh, 1972), 250-5. The English Geneva Bible of 1560 has no marginal comment on Matthew 28:16-20 except for a generalizing gloss on v. 20a.

²¹ The anonymous *Ecclesiastes; or, the preacher. An essay on the duties of a public religious instructor, chiefly drawn from a Latin treatise...* (London, 1797) uses only a small portion of Erasmus's work, with none relevant to world mission. In 1730 Thomas Bray, founder of the S.P.C.K. and the S.P.G., brought out a new edition of the Latin as a preparatory manual for missionaries.

²² Erasmus, *Ecclesiastes Libri I-II*, ed. Jacques Chomarat (*Opera...*V:4; Amsterdam, 1991), 144-60. A partial translation of the relevant paragraphs is given by J. R. Coates, 'Scholarship and Missions: Erasmus' in *East and West Review: An Anglican Missionary Quarterly Review* 2:3 (1936), 244-9. Cf. G. H. Williams, 'Erasmus and the Reformers on Non-Christian Religions and Salus Extra Ecclesiam' in T. K. Rabb and J. E. Seigel (eds), *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of E. H. Harbison* (Princeton, NJ, 1969), 319-70, at 335-7; Eike Wolgast, 'Erasmus von Rotterdam uber die Weltmission' in *Zeitschrift fur Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 79 (1995), 111-19.

use in court indicates that the governments expected it be of prime importance in Anabaptist argument.²³

As one Anabaptist put it, 'Our faith stands on nothing other than the command of Christ (Matthew 28, Mark 16)... For Christ didn't say to his disciples: go forth and celebrate the Mass, but go forth and preach the Gospel.'²⁴

It was not only on believers' baptism that the Matthaean-Marcian Commission spoke to core characteristics of Anabaptist Radicalism – although we certainly must not underestimate the force of this particular attraction. Making the Commission binding on every believer expressed the Anabaptist rejection of all kinds of hierarchical privilege, while the travel involved served the commitment to pilgrimage and the homelessness of the persecuted. So it is not always on 'making disciples of all nations' that Anabaptist attention fastens when one or other limb of the Commission is cited, yet by the same token all its parts deeply informed the Anabaptist vision.

Alas, Anabaptist enthusiasm for the Great Commission (which in their usage would surely already have merited this honorific) served only to stiffen magisterial Reformers' reserve about it. Quite apart from baptism – on which Anabaptism posed a monumental challenge to the whole ecclesio-political basis of the conservative Reformations – the Radicals' freelance missionizing as 'strange unappointed spiritual gypsies', as a prominent Lutheran polemicist described them,²⁵ flew in the face of the Reformers' growing interest in fixed localized appointments – the Lutherans' 'stations' in particular. Together with Rome's intolerable citation of these Matthaean and Marcian verses to substantiate its claims to universal apostolic jurisdiction, one could scarcely imagine a scenario more guaranteed to ensure that respectable biblical Reformers would not set much store by the Great Commission – a classic case of neglect in reaction against others' misuse. An honourable exception or two can be named, such as Martin Bucer of Strasbourg and Cambridge, who, in his classic pastoral treatise *The True Care of Souls*, made the ingathering of

²³ F. H. Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (New York, London, 1964), 111. Cf. also Hans Kasdorf, 'Anabaptists and the Great Commission in the Reformation' in *Direction* 4:2 (1975), 303-18 – an important corrective article. Regrettably, the content of Roland H. Bainton's 'The Great Commission' in *Mennonite Life* 8:4 (1953), 183-9, bears very little relation to its title.

²⁴ Cited by Littell, *Origins*, 111.

²⁵ Justus Menius, cited by Littell, *Origins*, 114-15.

the lost the first task of the pastor and listed Mark 16:15 among other texts mandating a universal offer of the gospel to all nations.²⁶

DISTINGUISHED EXCEPTIONS: SARAVIA AND VON WELZ

Yet the inconsequentiality of such exceptional clarity became obvious when in post-Reformation decades isolated champions of the Matthean commission met with almost total indifference or hostility. Adrian (Hadrian) Saravia was a Protestant of Spanish-Flemish descent who served both in the Netherlands and England, where he was a friend of Richard Hooker and helped to translate the AV/KJV. In a Latin treatise published in London in 1590, *The Different Ranks of the Ministers of the Gospel*, he propounded ‘in his vision of the apostolate and apostolic succession’ an element which ‘was new in his day, new not only for England but for the entire sixteenth century Reformation. We mean his views on apostolicity in the sense of the church’s continuing missionary commission’ – which he based almost entirely on Matthew 28.²⁷

Chapter 17 of Saravia’s work is entitled ‘That the Command to Preach the Gospel to All Nations is Still Binding on the Church, Although the Apostles are Removed to Heaven: and that Apostolical Authority is Necessary Thereto’. It begins as follows:

The command to preach the Gospel and the mission to all nations were so given to the Apostles, that they must be understood to be binding on the Church also. The injunction to preach the Gospel to all nations of unbelievers had respect not only to the age of the Apostles, but to all ages to come till the end of the world.... This promise [‘I am with you always, until the end of the world’] cannot be disjoined from the precept preceding, and consequently appears that Christ commanded his Church to provide that the Gospel should be preached to unbelievers, after the departure of the Apostles, according as opportunities of time, place, and persons, should admit....

Even now, after the lapse of fifteen centuries, the Gospel has not yet reached to all nations....

The fact that none are now-a-days sent to nations ignorant of the Lord, does not prove that there exists no authority to send them, but shews a lack of persons fit to be sent: or, at all events, a lack of zeal for the extension of Christ’s kingdom.²⁸

²⁶ Bucer, *Von der Waren Seelsorge* [1538] in R. Stupperich (ed.), *Martin Bucer Deutsche Schriften*, vol. 7 (Gutersloh, Paris, 1964), 141-9.

²⁷ Willem Nijenhuis, *Adrianus Saravia (c. 1532-1613)* (Studies in the History of Christian Thought XXI; Leiden, 1980), 240. For publication details of the *De Diversis Ministrorum Evangelii Gradibus*, see *ibid.*, 117-18.

²⁸ *A Treatise on the Different Degrees of the Christian Priesthood*, transl. by A. W. S. [A. W. Street] (Oxford, 1840), 161-2, 164-5. The first translation

Saravia's treatise, whose argument he advanced and defended in his *Defensio* of 1594 and *Examen* of 1610, suffered from being a contribution to a debate about the apostolic grounding of the Episcopal office. This factor, as much as blinkered readings of Matthew 28, provoked opposition. From Geneva Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor, issued a chapter-by-chapter refutation in 1592. In essence he distinguished between the 'extraordinary' 'commands and activities which were restricted to the apostles themselves' and the 'ordinary' ones applying to the whole church, with worldwide mission assigned to the first category.²⁹ Also found in Beza is the view that the apostles had themselves fulfilled the universal dissemination of the gospel – which is not entirely absent from Calvin. A bizarre echo of this delusion crops up in the records of the Brazilian mission, which report a tradition of the Indians of a white visitor to their country very many years ago who taught them the same as the Genevans about the creator God – and was taken by our Genevan source to be one of the apostles.³⁰

Lutheran opposition to Saravia's work went further still. The eminent Jena theologian, Johann Gerhard (1582-1637), regarded in Lutheran orthodoxy as third in importance after the two Martins, Luther and Chemnitz, included a refutation in his *Loci Theologici* (1610-1622). He explicitly uncoupled the promise of Matthew 28:20 from the command of verse 19, reserving the latter to the apostles. More brazenly than the Genevans he made a New Testament case for the apostles' implementation of universal evangelization.³¹ Such reasonings were given a supreme Lutheran *imprimatur* in a notorious landmark judgement of the Wittenberg Faculty of Theology in 1651, which a German pioneer of the history of missions called 'to us of today almost incomprehensible'.³²

One more lone voice in the Lutheran world deserves to be mentioned, Justinian von Welz (1621-1668), a godly, practical aristocrat whose religious pilgrimage passed through two hidden decades from which he emerged as a kind of evangelical ascetic prophet. In a handful of treatises published mostly in the mid-1660s he exhorted all 'Christians of the

appeared in 1592; Nijenhuis, *Adrianus Saravia*, 118, 128. See Smith's dissertation, 'The Contribution' (see n. 12 above), for a fuller treatment of Saravia's treatise, but on historical and bibliographical matters his work has been superseded by Nijenhuis' monograph.

²⁹ Beza, *Ad Tractationem de Ministrorum Evangelii Gradibus... responsio* (Geneva, 1592), 106. Cf. Nijenhuis, *Adrianus Saravia*, 242-3.

³⁰ Beaver, 'Genevan Mission', 18.

³¹ Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, ed. J. F. Cotta, vol. 13 (Tubingen, 1775), 38-42. Cf. Warneck, *Outline*, 28-31.

³² Warneck, *Outline*, 27-8.

Augsburg Confession' to set up a missionary society to undertake the conversion of unbelieving nations. He argued on a broader biblical and theological basis than any predecessor, but with no greater success.³³

LEGACIES OF THE REFORMATION ERA

It is essential at this point to pause and reflect on the legacies of the Reformation generations. They bequeathed not simply ambivalence of various kinds concerning the abiding force of Matthew 28 and Mark 16, but also two other influential factors. One is the absence from the Reformation churches' confessions and other formularies of a chapter on world mission. It is not merely a matter of fatal uncertainty about the Great Commission. The typical normative church document of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries devoted no special treatment to a universal gospel mandate. This is not to deny the appearance of occasional statements, prayers and exhortations in various official texts expressive of a commitment to evangelizing all nations. Following Bucer's suggestion, the 1552 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* prescribed the reading of Matthew 28:18-20 for the ordination of priests, but in the 1662 *Book* it became optional in consecrating bishops. The title-page of the first printing of the Scots Confession in 1561 quoted Matthew 24:14:

And this glad tydinges of the kingdom shalbe preached through the hole world for a witness to all nations and then shall the end cvm.

The Westminster Assembly's *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* includes this rubric in its draft 'Publick Prayer before the Sermon':

To pray for the propagation of the gospel and kingdom of Christ to all nations; for the conversion of the Jews, the fullness of the Jews, the fall of the Antichrist, and the hastening of the second coming of our Lord.

The answer to Question 191 in Westminster's Larger Catechism, 'What do we pray for in the second petition [of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom

³³ James A. Scherer (transl. and ed.), *Justinian Welz. Essays by An Early Prophet of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1969); Warneck, *Outline*, 32-7... It is clear from the studies of Richard Sibbes, Richard Baxter, John Eliot, Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards in Sidney H. Rooy, *The Theology of Missions in the Puritan Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1965) that the Matthaean commission was taken seriously in at least some of these writers; cf. 98-100, 119ff., 153 on Baxter, and 235-6 on Eliot. Further research is needed to clarify whether their witness became representative of the Puritan mind.

come”]?, affirms that we pray for the gospel to be propagated throughout the world, the Jews called and the fullness of the gentiles brought in. The Westminster Confession itself talks of the covenant of the New Testament being held forth... to all nations, both Jews and gentiles (7:6), and of Christ having given the visible church ‘the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world’ (25:3). But the verses of Matthew 28 were added to the Confession’s chapters nearly always on other issues – Trinity, person of Christ, the sacraments, especially baptism, the church’s perpetuity on earth, issues of church government, church synods. In an address given to the Free Church of Scotland General Assembly in 1869, Alexander Duff commented on the Westminster Confession as follows:

Now, while there we have all the highest doctrines laid down faithfully and truly, we have no distinct allusion to what supremely occupied the soul of the Divine Redeemer shortly before His ascension into glory, and was embodied in His final instructions to His disciples – and that is the evangelisation of the world! ... That subject ought to have a whole chapter to itself; and if anything is to be added to the Confession, I would add that to it.³⁴

But such scattered and generally incidental references scarcely amount to a charter on world mission. This is confirmed by a tell-tale feature of the second noteworthy legacy of the Reformation. This was an alternative framework for the fundamental task of the church which has remained hugely influential in the Reformation churches until the present day. It focuses on the marks (*notae*) of the church – either two, the faithful proclamation of the Word and the administration of the dominical sacraments, or three, if ecclesiastical discipline is also included. The specification of these marks originated in the special context of the sixteenth century as what distinguished the true church from the false, the reformed from the unreformed. Here is a point of crucial importance for this paper. These marks emerged in a quite specific ecclesio-political setting in early modern Christendom, and integral to that setting was competition between different claimants for recognition as the true church by the civil authorities and the community at large. The Reformation confessions largely served the same rivalry, which partly explains their limitations. Despite their origin, the marks of the church have retained a central validity to the present day, and significantly shape formal ecclesiastical definitions of what the church is for, as seen in the ordination services of Reformation churches. And note this well: mission is not one of the traditional marks we have retained from a hugely different context from our own.

³⁴ Alexander Duff, *Foreign Missions: An Address* (Edinburgh, 1869), 25.

The emerging Protestant churches occasionally found themselves on the receiving end of Catholic counter-charges that they could not be true churches because they did not engage in world mission – as the Catholic Franciscans and Dominicans had been doing for centuries.

APPLYING THE GREAT COMMISSION TO HOME CHURCHES

When the Great Commission was at last rescued from its obscurity, from, say, 1800, it was applied of course to the overseas ‘mission field’, and not to Scotland or England or Germany. William Carey’s *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792) began with a section based on Matthew 28:18-20, ‘An Enquiry whether the Commission given by our Lord to his Disciples be not still binding on us’.³⁵ From this time on, the Great Commission hardly looked back, as it were, though there were struggles ahead in most churches. But for the home countries, the mark-based ministry of Word and sacraments sufficed as the regnant paradigm of the church’s role on earth. The dichotomy survives virtually unscathed into the twenty-first century, not least in significant stretches of Scottish Presbyterianism, not excluding the more conservative variety.

What if we were to abolish geographical distinctions and allow the Great Commission to be enthroned as the ruling authoritative mandate from the risen Christ to determine not only what we seek to do overseas but also the life of the church in Scotland, or wherever the home country is for you? That is to say, ‘making disciples of all nations’ will include rather than exclude Scotland, and proclamation of the Word and the service of the sacraments and pastoral discipline and no doubt other tasks will all be set within this supreme framework.

Perhaps it will be objected that there is little or no difference between the Great Commission and the ministry of Word and sacraments model. We have in this survey noted tendencies for the terms of the former to be

³⁵ Carey, *An Enquiry*, 7-13. I have used the facsimile reprint published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1891. Most of the rest of its 87 pages are devoted to statistics and demographics of ‘the Heathens’. Carey’s indebtedness to Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) for his reliance on Matthew 28:18-20 is argued by Michael A. G. Haykin in ‘Andrew Fuller on Mission: Text and Passion’ [2-4, 14-16] forthcoming in Ian M. Randall and Anthony R. Cross (eds), *Baptists and Mission: International Studies* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought 29; Milton Keynes, 2007); cf. Fuller’s ‘An Apology for the Late Christian Missions to India’ (1808) in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller, with a Memoir of his Life* by Andrew Gunton Fuller (London, 1841), 796-828, at 815, 820-1.

collapsed into the latter, so that this hypothetical objection merits attention.

Semantically, the two are clearly different. In the Great Commission the object of the dominant verb is 'all nations'. English translation gives us two objects – 'all nations' and 'disciples', but in the Greek 'disciples' is part of the verb, as reflected in the AV/KJV (inadequate) rendering 'teach'. The other paradigm has impersonal objects – Word and sacraments. The former is more obviously directed towards achieving an effect – making people everywhere into followers of Jesus, whereas the latter's emphasis falls on activities. The former, one might say, lends itself to a kind of verification test: are people actually becoming disciples? The latter appeals to the test of faithfulness: is the Word actually being preached, are the sacraments actually being celebrated? It is not invidious to suggest that this latter is even capable of falling prey to a sort of *ex opere operato* vindication: yes, we have preached, we have observed the sacraments, and if none has become a disciple, that is their responsibility, or perhaps God's.

Entailed here is what more detailed content should be given to these two activities: what rightly belongs to the making of disciples, and what to preaching the Word? And in particular what would a ministry of proclaiming the Word look like when undertaken from the perspective and within the framework of the Great Commission? This last question immediately takes us back to an outline analysis of the Matthaean passage, and the participles dependent on the controlling imperative, 'make disciples'.

First is baptizing in the threefold name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If the Great Commission is kept to the fore, it should not be possible for baptism to be so overshadowed by the ministry of the Word as it so often is. Since baptizing inseparably implies the baptized community, it carries with it the task of incorporation into the church, as a body of people whose character is that of baptized disciples, not simply of those whose identity lies in faith-response to a message.

Secondly comes teaching all that Jesus taught his closest followers to observe. That teaching is presumably to be done not solely by public formal exposition, but in some of the various ways in which Jesus taught his disciples.

'Discipling' as a form of Christian ministry and training has been gaining prominence within at least the evangelical constituency in recent decades. I remember very little emphasis on it in my formative years as a Christian student. Developments such as the Navigators and the variegated charismatic movement have helped to promote discipling as an intentional pattern of forming Christians to be truly followers of Jesus.

The changing position of Christians in a more brashly secularized or paganized culture will surely make attention to disciple-formation a higher imperative. Numerous commentators have discerned in the contemporary West uncanny parallels (*mutatis mutandis*, of course) with the early centuries when the nascent church had to make its way into the Mediterranean world, and converts from paganism needed to be ‘deconstructed’ and then ‘reconstructed’ through the pre-baptismal processes that William Willimon has called a ‘detoxification’ exercise.³⁶

Another legacy of the Reformation was the absence of the global scope from the marks-of-the-church model. (Its currency from the sixteenth century onwards had the effect of superseding the traditional creedal notes – one, holy, catholic [i.e. universal], apostolic.) The Great Commission challenges our continuing bifurcation between home ministry and overseas missions. At what frontier does the Commission kick in, as it were? When do you first have to show your passport or secure a visa or start learning a foreign language? There is surely scope for urban cross-cultural mission in Scotland, and how much more in England. Have we thought how the application of the Great Commission looks from other vantage points, such as the church in Kenya or Korea or Singapore? Does each of these churches think of the Commission as placing among the ‘all nations’ not its homeland but other countries patently in need of primary mission, like Scotland – whose church once stood as the sending church, the home of Christianity, to these other nations? How deep does church decline in Scotland need to go before we are prepared to welcome ‘reverse mission’, to be designated ‘a mission field’ (if this terminology has to survive) as we once designated overseas territories in need of mission ministry? The sharpest question may be whether the Scottish church is yet ready to learn how to ‘do mission’ from churches originally among the ‘all nations’ but now, it seems, much better at it than we are.

If we take the Luke-Acts missiology as a variant of the Great Commission, then the task of bearing witness/making disciples begins on our doorstep, in Jerusalem – see Acts 1:8! One of the most thorough structural studies of Matthew 28:18-20 concludes that

[William] Carey’s concern to see men and women from among all the nations become disciples of Jesus the Risen Lord was certainly a proper concern. However, when the attention has been focussed on the ‘going’ rather than

³⁶ Quoted by Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge, 1995), 26. See now Kreider’s highly suggestive essay, ‘Baptism and Catechesis as Spiritual Formation’ in Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton (eds), *Remembering Our Future. Explorations in Deep Church* (Milton Keynes, 2007), 170-206.

upon 'the making of disciples' it has been misplaced. The important thing about the Great Commission is that it has to do with bringing men and women to submit to Jesus as Lord, to become His disciples, wherever they may be.³⁷

We surely have a long way to go in most of our Scottish churches before we have overcome a broadly self-sufficient mentality which still assumes that our own tradition contains all the resources needed, revitalized to be sure, for successful church recovery. That is to say, we are still content with a model of church action deriving from the Reformation. Hence we have churches which are biblical and orthodox to a fault but evangelistically quite ineffective – yet keen supporters of overseas missions! There 'our missionaries' engage in various kinds of disciple-making which we pray for and financially sustain but would not think of adopting into our own local mission outreach. Over the past half-century major sections of Scottish evangelicalism have come to place a high premium on a particular form of the ministry of the Word known as 'expository preaching'. The core remit of 'making disciples' must indubitably encompass more than this pattern of proclamation. An immediate distinction to be addressed is that between content and method. It took too long in some quarters for Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:21 to escape from the captivity of the AV/KJV: 'it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe'. It should have read 'by the foolishness of the message preached'. According to verse 18, it is the message about the cross which is the power of God to those entering into salvation.³⁸

'Expository preaching' in the specialized sense which now almost monopolizes the phrase is a method for organizing teaching and preaching which has proved in the hands of God really fruitful in certain church-historical contexts. It cannot claim any special scriptural status itself, over and above other schemes for ensuring biblically-balanced instruction and proclamation.³⁹ The extent to which preachers adhere to it should be a matter of wisdom rather than an assumed biblical warrant or mere traditionalism, however venerable or recent that tradition might be. Ancient tradition may well command the respectful attention of practical wisdom.

One thing is certain if we elevate the Great Commission to the position of unequalled importance claimed for it earlier in this lecture. It

³⁷ Peter O'Brien, 'The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?', in *Reformed Theological Review* 35 (1976), 66-78, at 78.

³⁸ The recent usage of 'Word-ministry' is worrying if it implies a heightened emphasis on verbal method rather than scriptural content.

³⁹ See the sane comments by Iain H. Murray in *A Scottish Christian Heritage* (Edinburgh, 2006), 320-6.

will cast us back on the discipling ministry of Jesus, who was far more than a pulpit-preacher.⁴⁰ In seeking to obey the Great Commission's focal instruction to 'make disciples of all nations', perhaps our first priority should be to become disciples of our Lord and Master as the supreme maker of disciples.

APPENDIX

When did 'the Great Commission' become the standard title for Matthew 28:18-20?

[I am grateful to Dr Brian Stanley of the Henry Martyn Centre, Cambridge, and Dr David Reimer, my erstwhile colleague in New College, Edinburgh, for assistance with this Appendix.]

Since 'commission' is a common enough English noun and 'great' an even more common adjective, occurrences of the pairing of the two words with reference to Matthew 28:18-20/Mark 16:15-18, or even in a more generalized sense of Christ's 'marching orders' to his church are to be found long before the more restricted application developed. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) used the phrase in a hymn first published in 1709.

The Apostles Commission; or the Gospel attested by Miracles, Mark xvi.15, &c. Matth. xxviii.18, &c.

'Go preach My Gospel,' saith the Lord,
'Bid the whole Earth my Grace receive;
He shall be sav'd that trusts my Word,
He shall be damn'd that won't believe.

'I'll make your great Commission known,
And ye shall prove my Gospel true,
By all the Works that I have done,
By all the wonders ye shall do.

'Teach all the Nations my Commands,
I'm with you till the World shall end;
All Power is trusted in my Hands,
I can destroy, and I defend.'

⁴⁰ For a recent study by an educationalist, see Sylvia Wilkey Collinson, *Making Disciples. The Significance of Jesus' Educational Methods for Today's Church* (Milton Keynes, 2004); cf. 41: 'The discipling model depended to some degree on formal verbal teaching and oral communication and this element was frequently present in Jesus' teaching, but he supplemented it to a large degree by many informal teaching methodologies.'

These are verses 1, 2 and 4 of five in all (Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs. In Three Books. I. Collected from the Scriptures. II. Composed, on Divine Subjects. III. Prepared for the Lord's Supper*, 14th edit. [London, 1740], 101-2, where the hymn is no. CXXXVIII in Book I. For its first appearance in the second edition of this collection in 1709, not in the original in 1707, see John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, 2nd edit. [London, 1907], 1237.) The earliest comparable usage I have encountered is much more obscure, in a short pamphlet in the British Library consisting of three intensely rhetorical and biblical exhortatory letters written from York Castle by one W. D. in 1661: *To All the Faithful Brethren Born of the Immortal Seed, of the Father of Life, And sent forth in the great Commission, and Power of the King of Eternal Glory, to gather his elect from the Winds of the Earth, forth of all Nations & Kindreds where they are scattered*. 'The... Commission... of the King of Eternal Glory' is generalized, but seems to have mission to all nations in view in its reference to divine visitations of 'the Northern Countries, & Barbadoes, New England, Virginia, Bermudoes, & the Countries & Islands there awaies, and elsewhere'.

William Carey's *Enquiry* (1792) did not use the phrase, and the nature of his argument in Section 1 presupposes that the Matthaean-Marcian mandate did not yet enjoy the recognition that would have warranted it. Yet the struggle for recognition that Carey successfully advanced would see these texts increasingly prominent during the nineteenth century. In 1868 Henry Venn, long-serving Secretary of the Church Missionary Society, referred to Matthew 28:19 as 'a familiar text [that] has been in all our thoughts at these valedictory dismissals for more than half a century' (William Knight, *Memoir of Henry Venn, B.D.*, new edit. (London, 1882), 164.

During the nineteenth century a number of trends are apparent from a preliminary survey:

- The use of the phrase 'the Great Commission' becomes more frequent;
- It does not always refer to the Matthaean-Marcian commission, or to anything mission-focussed at all;
- When it does refer to Matthew/Mark, it may fasten on something quite other than the core discipling imperative;
- What we know as 'the Great Commission' continues to be spoken of in other terms, especially 'the apostolic commission';

- Around 1870, a number of occurrences may suggest that a more conventional usage in a twentieth-century sense is emerging, but there are exceptions, and at present no causes of this trend can be identified.

The following examples illustrate the difficulty of discerning any linear development.

A sermon preached in Peterborough Cathedral on September 25, 1870, by Francis Henry Thicknesse entitled *The great commission of the great King* (Oxford, London, 1870), focuses centrally on Matthew 28:18-20 but treats the episode as the first ordination, has no mission interest and in the body of the sermon never uses ‘the great commission’ or any similar phrase.

James Russell Woodford’s *The great commission* (London, 1886) is subtitled ‘twelve addresses on the ordinal’ and has no contact with the modern ‘Great Commission’ at all.

The Charter of the Kingdom. A Sermon, by Thomas Groser (printed privately, 1888), is based on Mark 16:15-18 (amplified at times implicitly from Matthew), ‘the great commission and charge given by our Lord’.

The world-mission dimension of Adolph Saphir’s *Christ & the church* (London, 1874) is inescapable. It is subtitled ‘sermons on the apostolic commission (Matthew XXVIII.18-20)’, but uses no language at all close to ‘the Great Commission’.

The Gospel Commission: its import, its obligations, and its influence in the commencement and conduct of the Christian life, by James Walker (Edinburgh, London, 1826), describes the Matthaean text as forming, in substance, ‘the fundamental charter of the Church of Christ’, but all is applied to the home church.

Daniel Wilson, *The Apostolical Commission considered, with reference to the clergy of the Church of England* (London, 1835), is interested in episcopacy, not world mission.

Henry Martyn preached a sermon, probably in England before his departure for India in 1805, on ‘Christ’s Grand Commission to His Apostles’ on Matthew 28:18-20, ‘the Farewell Charge of Christ to his Disciples’ (in *Twenty Sermons*, 2nd edit., London, 1822, no. XIX, 391-412). This is suggestive of a movement towards a more normative usage.

Great expectations are aroused by *The great commission, or, The Christian Church constituted and charged to convey the gospel to the world* (London, 1842), by John Harris, President of Cheshunt College. This work of over 500 pages was the best essay on 'The Duty, Privilege, and Encouragement of Christians To Send The Gospel of Salvation to the Unenlightened Nations of the Earth', in a competition set up in Scotland and commended by Thomas Chalmers and Alexander Duff. The book itself never uses 'the great commission' of the title, but clearly honours the combined final command and promise of Christ 'as the great Missionary charter of the Church for all time' (150-1). The Matthaean text, however, is but one of several commands of Christ listed under the scriptural basis for missionary enterprise.

Duff himself used the words 'the great commission' in his 1869 address, but not in a privileged sense (*Foreign Missions*, 26).

The Commission Given By Jesus Christ to His Apostles, by Archibald McLean of Edinburgh (3rd edit., Edinburgh, 1823), is structured throughout its 350 pages by Matthew 28:18-20, which is repeatedly called 'the commission' without need of qualification.

This paper has earlier noted *The Great Commission: Meditations on Home and Foreign Missions* (1872), by E. M. Goulburn, which often calls the Matthaean passage 'the Great/great Commission', and expounds it clause by clause (cf. 3, 7, 19, 36, 57, 59). It is distinctive in treating the shorter Marcan version of the Commission as 'more purely missionary' than Matthew.

The Great Commission in its Missionary Aspect, by John Laidlaw of Perth, a sermon preached to the same Free Church Assembly of 1869 (Edinburgh, 1869), uses 'great' throughout, and 'the Great Commission' is the most frequent way of referring to its text, Matthew 28:18-20.

But then in the same year *The Great Commission* by Robert Ainslie Redford of Hull, the annual sermon before the Congregational Union (London, 1869), has as its text Isaiah 43:10 and deals generally with the church's vocation of witness, with no hint of Matthew 28 or universal mission.

The need for more systematic investigation could not be more obvious, and the field of enquiry is huge. Meantime, suggestions are advanced which may be more or less plausible. Some website has given currency to the claim that it was Hudson Taylor who popularised 'the Great Commission' to describe Matthew 28. This has appeared in print, but no source

reference is supplied, and research so far (a skim through the relevant volumes of A. J. Broomhall's seven-volume *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century*, Sevenoaks, 1981-1989) has not come up with supporting evidence. More appealing is Brian Stanley's proposal that it was the Scofield Bible of 1909 which widely influenced an evangelical readership. Its heading for Matthew 28:16-20 is 'Jesus in Galilee. His great commission', with 'Christ's Commission to the Eleven' for Mark 16:15-18. Behind Scofield may lie the preference of A. T. Pierson, one of its consultant editors, who from the 1880s had been using 'the Great Commission', but more frequently of Mark than Matthew. It is not clear that at the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh in 1910 the honorific designation was customary.

Then there are the biblical commentators. Already in the early eighteenth century Matthew Henry's exposition used 'commission' several times in his analysis of the Matthaean passage, along with 'the great charter'. A small search of some widely-read late-nineteenth-century commentaries indicates that a decade or two before the Scofield Bible 'the Great Commission' came naturally to commenting pens. The volume on Matthew by John A. Broadus (Philadelphia, 1886) in the *American Commentary on the New Testament* (ed. Alvah Hovey) used the capitalized phrase four times in dealing with the verses in question (583, 586, 591, 596-7). John Monro Gibson's treatment of the Gospel in W. R. Nicoll's *Expositor's Bible* (London, 1890) deploys several phrases: 'the commission', 'a/this Great Commission', 'the great commission' (439, 443, 444-5). The *Pulpit Commentary* series (ed. H. D. M. Spence and J. S. Exell) draws on a handful of contributors for each volume. *St Matthew*, by A. L. Williams *et al.*, vol. II (London, 1894), has different writers using 'a/the commission' and 'the great commission' (643, 656, 660, vi [at end]). In the first edition of the Century Bible (ed. W. F. Adeney) W. F. Slater on *St Matthew* (Edinburgh, 1901) introduced his exposition of 28:16-20 with the heading '[The disciples] see the Lord, and receive the great commission.'

This admittedly limited range of evidence counts in favour of the last quarter or third of the nineteenth century as the period when 'the Great Commission' really caught on and could be used as though its normal reference to Matthew 28:18-20 called for no explanation or justification. Only more extensive research will settle the issue.