

Teach the Nations

Lectures on the Great Commission

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Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Matthew 28:18-20

INTRODUCTION

The church is the gathering of God's people. These people come together because of God's sovereign election and providence, and they come together around a common creed and a common cause. They should not be a group of people who are just drifting through life, waiting for death, since this describes the pitiful existence of non-Christians, from which God has delivered us through Jesus Christ.

This common creed and common cause must not be reduced to almost nothing, just so that they may remain common among God's people. Jesus Christ is the one who defines our creed and our cause. It is around *his* creed and *his* cause that true Christians unite. Those who reject his creed and his cause betray their false profession of faith.

The creed and the cause of Christ are not minimal, but specific and substantial. And for the church to remain a faithful and effective community of God's people, it is imperative for it to possess a firm grasp of its creed and its cause, its doctrine and purpose.

Only by knowing the doctrine that it must promote can the church remain faithful, distinctive, and retain its purpose and identity in this world. And only by knowing the mission that it must fulfill can the church remain effective, focusing its resources and designing its activities and outreaches with this proper end in view. Moreover, when the creed and the cause of the church are spelled out, it becomes easier for individuals within the church to align themselves with its doctrine and purpose, and this in turn makes them more faithful and effective as believers.

Therefore, in what follows, we will direct our attention to the passage in the Gospel of Matthew commonly called the Great Commission. From this passage, we will consider the creed and the cause of the church as they were first declared by the Head of the Church.

Although the first recipients of this commission were the apostles, it was never meant to begin and end with them. Rather, the apostles laid the foundation, and in the course of their ministries, they taught others and commanded them to continue the mission, and so that they would in turn teach others, who would also teach the generation after them.

We will divide our discussion into three parts, and in these three parts, we will consider the charge, the message, and the power of our Lord's command to teach all the nations everything that he has commanded.

1. THE GREAT COMMISSION

By the time Jesus declares the Great Commission to his apostles, he is about to be taken up to heaven and to be seated at the Father's right hand. At the background of the commission are all the things that transpired before this event. Among other things, these include his incarnation, temptation, proclamation, crucifixion, and resurrection.

It would be instructive to examine all of these items before we consider the Great Commission, and indeed they provide the background to fully understand our passage. However, to do that would entail going through the entire Gospel from its beginning, and that would be a much larger undertaking than we can presently afford. So, despite the deficiencies, we will have to limit our study to these several verses.

Jesus begins by saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." An in-depth exposition of the passage should include an explanation on how he obtained this authority. But since we cannot take time to consider all that went before, we will simply note that he has this authority and proceed on this basis. Nevertheless, we can mention that this authority pertains to his human nature, and as our Mediator and the Head of the Church. In his divine nature, he had always possessed absolute authority over all things.

We shall return to this issue of authority later and apply it to the Great Commission, as we will need this point to address a particular question.

He continues, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." Previously, the apostles were told to remain in Israel when Jesus sent them to preach, and Jesus himself stated that he was sent to the people of Israel. However, the gospel was never rigidly and totally withheld from the Gentiles. Jesus even commended the great faith of several Gentiles who acknowledged his special authority and power.

But now he explicitly charges the disciples to preach to all nations. People speak of universal grace and universal salvation, but this is the only kind of universalism that the Bible knows – not the salvation of all people, and not even the possibility of the salvation of all people, but the salvation of all kinds of people, people from all nations and backgrounds.

God has chosen all kinds of people for salvation. By his grace, no group is too bad to be excluded from hearing the gospel. Peter was admonished with the words, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15). But on the other hand, no group is good enough that it can escape God's wrath and gain access to him without the gospel. Thus the church is to proclaim the gospel to all nations, summoning the chosen ones to faith in Christ.

When Christians think about their responsibilities toward the Great Commission as individuals, on the one hand, they must become dissatisfied with a spectator mentality, but on the other hand, it is just as important that they reject a particular kind of individualism, the one that supposes a Christian is not fulfilling his duty unless he is doing every little thing that the church as a whole is supposed to do.

Pastors often warn their people about the spectator mentality. It is the attitude that the work of the gospel is almost exclusively carried out by professional ministers, while the rest of the believers just sit and watch. The better spectator Christians might be generous with their money, so that even though they are not doing anything, at least their ministers can continue the work. But this is not enough. Christ calls everyone to labor for his kingdom. Besides being generous with their money, believers ought to be generous with their time, their strength, and their other resources, and to dedicate these things for the work of the gospel, often under the direction of their church leaders.

The spectator mentality is too common, but at least there are people who preach against it, and who urge believers to become more active in helping their churches, as well as to become more aggressive witnesses for Christ in their daily lives, in whatever situation they find themselves. On the other hand, the problem of individualism is less obvious – that is, the kind that I have in mind – and it is even encouraged and commended by some preachers who fail to recognize that the Great Commission is carried out by the church as a whole, and not by individuals as considered independently from one another.

By opposing this individualism, I am not echoing the common assertion that as a matter of principle every believer must be associated with a local congregation and that his faith is seriously impoverished – or that it would even die – without the nurture of the church. Although it is maintained by many traditions, this is in fact a damnable false doctrine that is based on forced inferences and circumstantial evidences from biblical passages. The teaching contradicts the sufficiency of Christ, the priesthood of all believers, and all that the Scripture teaches about the direct relationship between God and the Christian, with Christ as the sole mediator. The church has an important role, but it is often distorted and overstated by human traditions. Instead, we must encourage the individualism that acknowledges the total sufficiency of Christ, apart from the church and other men, for the faith, growth, and ministry of the individual believer.

I am referring to another kind of individualism. Sometimes you would hear a preacher say, "You ought to witness to at least one person every day," or "If someone has known you for a week and still doesn't know that you are a Christian, there must be something wrong with you." Both of these statements, and others like them, might be true in some circumstances and for some people, but it is destructive and irresponsible for preachers to make these generalizations.

Sometimes they speak as if each believer is a whole church in himself, so that as an individual he must perform all the tasks that a church is supposed to carry out. Now if someone is excellent as a church administrator, but is terrible at preaching the gospel, of course he should strive to improve in personal evangelism, and of course he should

preach the gospel to whomever God brings to him in his providence. But there is nothing wrong for him to spend more of his time in church administration, so that other people, and the church as a whole, can become more effective in evangelism. It would be a great injustice for someone to ignore his less direct but nevertheless substantial contribution to the success of the church, and chide him for doing too little personal evangelism.

If someone appears to be doing too little of what you consider important, before you rebuke him about this, try to think if he is contributing to other areas of the church's ministry. Maybe personal evangelism is the only area in which he seems to come behind other people, and his contributions in other areas put you and the rest of the church to shame. And perhaps it is precisely because of this that he has not been able to spend as much time in personal evangelism, while making it possible for you and the others to effectively preach the gospel.

A congregation consists of various individuals – each has his own gift, and each has his own place. Rather than asking whether someone is doing *this* thing enough, we should ask whether he is doing a part, *his* part. We can also apply this to individual churches. Each local congregation is not expected to fulfill all of the Great Commission by itself; otherwise, each church would have to send missionaries to every nation in the world. Imagine the confusion that would result and the resources that would be wasted if this is indeed what each church tries to do, that is, when each church tries to be the only church in the world.

In short, while it would be wrong to think that you do not need to obey the Great Commission, and to leave it to other people, it would also be wrong to think that you are the only one obeying it, so that you would try to do all of it by yourself. Do not act as if other individuals do not exist, or as if other churches do not exist. And before you condemn someone else for doing too little, pay close attention to see if he is not in fact doing much more than you, and maybe even the one who makes your ministry possible and sustainable.

Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Therefore go and make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them...teaching them...." As the Head of the Church, he has defined our purpose and our agenda. What is it? What is this Great Commission? It is to "make disciples" – that is the simplest and most inclusive answer to the question. The other words in verses 19 and 20 will provide more details, but we will look at them later. Right now, we will focus on those words that we have highlighted, and draw out some of their implications.

The church must actively make disciples. What this involves is explained by the words that follow: "baptizing them...teaching them...." But the word "disciple" itself tells us a great deal. A disciple is a learner. He is certainly a student in the "classroom" sense, as he studies his master's teachings through verbal instructions and intellectual reflections. However, his relationship with the master is more involved than the typical classroom student, as he must also submit to his master's authority and follow his master's lifestyle.

In other words, a disciple is a *total* student – he strives to learn and adopt his master's philosophy, purpose, and passion.

Because Christians are the human contacts through which the world learns about Christ, in this limited and relative sense the people that we bring to the faith are our disciples. But it would be wrong let the converts stop here. Instead, we must make it clear that we are ourselves disciples of Christ, and that there is in fact only one Master (Matthew 23:8). Nevertheless, not all Christians are on the same level of maturity, and Christ has indeed designated teacher-student relationships among the members of his church. Thus Paul urges his readers to follow *him*, that is, as he follows *Christ* (1 Corinthians 11:1; also see 4:15-16, Philippians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

We must avoid following and revering Christian leaders so much that it amounts to idolatry. On the other hand, there are those who rebel against all human authority and claim that they follow Christ alone. But this is rebellious and not spiritual. The real reason for their defiance is often not a deeper allegiance to Christ, but a resistance against Christ, and this leads them to turn away from the human leaders who endeavor to declare and enforce Christ's commands to them. In any case, the Bible says, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority" (Hebrews 13:17).

We are to make disciples and not mere converts. Indeed, the Bible does not make a distinction between converts, believers, and disciples, as if one can barely become a believer and stop there, without becoming a learner after Christ. Rather, every true convert has also become and will remain a disciple. But if in our usage we make a distinction between conversion and discipleship, then we must say that the Great Commission is to make disciples, and not to make converts.

If disciples are learners, what are we to teach them? Or, to put it another way, what message must we declare to "all nations"? What is the "gospel" that we must preach to people? We will take up these questions later, but before we can even discuss the *message* of the Great Commission, there is already an objection about the *fact* of the Great Commission.

Non-Christians resent not only the message of evangelism but the very act of evangelism. They think that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with themselves, and so they regard the Christian mission to "convert" people as a tremendous insult. Various objections against evangelism are voiced on the basis of this general antagonism against the very idea of conversion, or the necessity of conversion.

It is said that the church's missionary emphasis amounts to a disdain toward the beliefs and customs of various people groups. Instead of bearers of good news, Christians are therefore invaders of cultures and destroyers of traditions, urging their hearers to abandon the faiths and practices that they have tried to preserve for hundreds of years. Protesting against Christian evangelism, these unbelievers suggest that rather than telling them to change and to convert, we should celebrate diversity and respect their beliefs and lifestyles.

And so they challenge the church: "What, do you think that you are so superior to all these people? What right do you have to impose your beliefs on them? How dare you to subvert the beliefs and practices that have distinguished and identified them as a people for hundreds of years? Why must everyone behave as you do, or believe what you believe? Who are you to tell them that they are all wrong and that you are right, that only you have the truth?"

Since Christians are usually cowards and weaklings, many of them respond by appeasement and compromise. That is, when non-Christians challenge the beliefs and practices of the church, Christians typically attempt to show that the non-Christians have exaggerated the gap between the church and the world, and that they have exaggerated the threat that Christianity poses to their beliefs, customs, and preferences.

But in reality, the situation is much worse than the non-Christians perceive, and than Christians are willing to admit. The gap is the distance between heaven and hell, but the non-Christians might not even believe in hell. The difference is between light and darkness, but many non-Christians only believe in gray. Thus the non-Christians in fact underestimate the gap between the church and the world, and the threat that Christianity poses against the things that they cherish.

Of course Christians are superior – if we are equal or even inferior, then why are we trying to convert them? Of course we know better; otherwise, why are we preaching to them? The key is that we are not superior or better in ourselves or because of ourselves. So we tell them, "Yes, we are indeed superior, and we indeed know better than you, but not in ourselves or because of ourselves, for before we became Christians, we were like you, without God and without hope in this world. But God, who is greater than all, has enlightened our minds and granted us understanding. He changed us and made us different – better – than before. And he has given us a mandate to declare the same message to you, and to warn you about the judgment to come."

If it is not the truth that we are superior by the kindness and the choice of God, then we should leave the non-Christians alone. If the Christian faith is not infinitely superior to anything that they know, then there is no point in seeking their conversion. To seek their conversion means that we think there is something wrong with them. Why not admit it? "Yes, there is something wrong with you, and that's why you must be converted."

The proper response is not to compromise, or to weaken our stance, but we must appeal to the foundation of the Great Commission, and that is the authority of Jesus Christ. The non-Christian challenge against the Great Commission is in fact a challenge against the one who issues the commission. But Jesus declares that he possesses "all authority in heaven and on earth," and it is on this basis that he commands his people to disciple all nations.

Because he has all authority "in heaven," the entire heaven is shut to any person who refuses to enter through him. As he states elsewhere, "No one comes to the Father except

through me" (John 14:6). And because he has all authority "on earth," the whole earth is open to Christians through Christ. Therefore, our answer to the objection against the gospel is the gospel itself. As we go forth into all nations to fulfill the Great Commission, at least spiritually and morally speaking, we are not trespassers, for we operate under the authority of Christ who rules over all the earth. If anything, the world is ours because of Christ – it does not belong to the non-Christians. Christ authorizes us to enter any territory and engage any person as we carry out the Great Commission. It is not up to the non-Christians to complain.

As for the charge that evangelism reeks of intellectual and cultural arrogance, our response should be that Christian intellect and culture are indeed superior, whether or not we are humble or arrogant about it. Still, we are not arrogant enough to defy Jesus Christ, who gave us the Great Commission. And we are certainly not stupid enough to say to him, "We are too humble to obey you!"

That said, we are commanded to preach the gospel, and not to transmit Western ideals or American values. What is Western is not necessarily Christian, and what is American is not always biblical. It is true that many Christians have blurred the distinction, and have preached their own non-biblical ethnic, cultural, or national traditions along with the gospel. But we are commissioned to teach the nations a Christian system of thought and a Christian way of life.

So we go beyond what Christ has authorized us to do if we enter a nation to take away their chopsticks and give them forks instead. This might seem trivial, but we are not authorized to make these changes, unless their customs contradict Christian teachings. On a more important level, we are also not called to preach our non-biblical theories of politics, science, education, and so on. But it is true that a biblical philosophy should affect and control every area of human thought and conduct. We just have to ensure that it is in fact a *biblical* philosophy that we are teaching, and not just the American way.

Christians have been commissioned and authorized to enter and engage every nation and every person with the teachings of Christ. And since Christ has commanded us to make disciples and not mere converts, not only are we to enter and engage, but we must also stay and teach. May God instill and reinforce in us a sense of mission, of duty, and of joyful obligation, to enter into every corner of the world and declare the gospel with authority. This comes as we embrace this great mandate from Christ, and truly understand that he has sent us to declare his salvation and dominion by his authority and at his command.

2. THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

Jesus commands us to "make disciples of all nations," and we have seen that disciples are learners. So what are they supposed to learn? When we approach potential converts, what are we supposed to tell them? Now that we have defined the Christian mandate, we must also define the Christian message.

Before we consider *what* we are to teach people, we should first consider the fact *that* we are to teach them. This characteristic of the Great Commission carries tremendous implications that define our approach toward non-Christians. The church today has often failed to confront the world with power partly because it has adopted a philosophy of discourse from the non-Christians that is contrary to the method dictated by Christ in the Great Commission.

One way to indicate the common error that I have in mind is by noting what Christ *does not* say – that is, he does not say, "Learn from all nations" or "Dialogue with all nations." Some think that it is less abrasive to give the impression that we are promoting mutual respect and understanding rather than imposing our beliefs on people. Such an approach generates less discomfort and hostility in others, and perhaps some of them will eventually see things our way.

However, if we give the impression that we are willing to listen to or even learn from non-Christians as we demand that they listen to and learn from us, then we are also implying that it is possible for us to change our beliefs when we hear the non-Christian views. Just as we demand that they abandon whatever non-Christian views that they hold in order to submit to Christian teachings, such an approach gives the impression that we are also willing, perhaps even with the same level of willingness that we demand from them, to renounce Jesus Christ and to adopt non-Christian beliefs.

If we give the impression that in every encounter with non-Christians, we are seeking mutual understanding, and that at every encounter it is possible for us to renounce Jesus Christ, then either we are liars or our faith is false. That is, if you are *sincerely* prepared to abandon Christian beliefs every time you speak or debate with a non-Christian, then you are *already* a non-Christian. True faith believes that the Christian faith is the truth, and not that it is only the best option out of what you have encountered so far. Consider the Chinese saying: "Riding on a cow to look for a horse" – you stay with what you have while looking for something better. This is contrary to biblical faith, which affirms that we have already found and embraced the ultimate truth in Christ, and there is no chance that we are wrong about it. But if there is in fact no possibility that you will consider the non-Christian views as true, or to renounce Jesus Christ, then it would be dishonest to give the opposite impression.

Therefore, when I approach a non-Christian, I will not lie to him and let him think that I am personally interested in his ideas, or that we are two seekers trying to discover the truth that is "out there" somewhere. I know that I have found the truth, that Christ has revealed the truth to me, and granted me faith to believe it and be transformed by it. So I am interested in the non-Christian's ideas only for the purpose of refuting them, and to adapt my presentation to anticipate objections and misunderstandings.

Jesus has sent me to *teach* the unbeliever the truth, to *tell* him what I know, and not to insinuate or negotiate him into the truth. Still less am I to seek the truth along with him. I am on a mission, not a quest for truth – I already have the truth, and that is what I am there to tell him. This does not imply that I must be mean and hostile. Depending on the person and the situation, I might be gentle, or I might be forceful, but I am not going to do anything less than to tell him what to believe and how to behave in accordance with Christ's teachings.

Of course this is offensive to non-Christians, and also to many who consider themselves Christians, but it is the Great Commission. Do you think that the non-Christians would support the Great Commission, endorsing it and cheering us on? No, those heading for destruction are scandalized by the gospel. Only those whose hearts God has prepared will welcome and embrace, not only the message of evangelism, but also the very act of evangelism.

One problem is that Christians are too self-centered in their thinking – they go because *they* want to go, because *they* want to share something useful with others. They do not operate on the basis of an external and objective spiritual authority. If as an ambassador you visit a foreign nation with the possibility of defection in mind, then you are not carrying out a mission at all, but you are there to gather information and weigh the advantages for yourself. Although you think that you are better off staying with your side, you are willing to entertain other options. On the other hand, I go to the non-Christians because Jesus has sent me, and I am there to deliver a message, to *tell* the people what my King requires of them. There is no possibility of compromise or defection, and I would be a miserable herald to allow a contrary impression.

So in the Great Commission we are to teach, and not to learn from or dialogue with the non-Christians. And Jesus does not say that it is the United States that will teach all nations, but Christians who are to teach all nations, including the United States. Therefore, we must disciple the United States also. This nation is a vast and hard mission field. It is vast because many people are not Christians, and it is hard because many of them think that they are. The Great Commission is relevant everywhere, even in the United States, and even in the church.

Now we must consider the message itself. Subordinate to and explanatory of "make disciples" are the commands to baptize and teach. We will focus on the teaching aspect, so that we cannot take time to discuss the significance of baptism in the Great Commission. This does not mean that baptism is unimportant. A full study of this passage

ought to explain its significance and its role in making disciples, but this is not a full study.

Nevertheless, we can say this: Water baptism cannot save anyone, and it happens only once to a person, whereas it is the teaching of the gospel that leads to conversion and maturity, and it is to be a constant and lifetime pursuit. Thinking about its role and implementation in the Great Commission will take up what time we have left. Again, this might highlight the importance of teaching, but it does not diminish the significance of water baptism.

Our passage specifies at least two things that must characterize our approach as we disciple the nations:

First, our message must be *Christian*. We make disciples "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The Father, the Son, and the Spirit each receives a definite article, indicating a clear distinction between the three, but the word "name" remains in the singular, indicating their essential unity and equality. The grammatical construction is such that if the Father is God, then the Son and the Spirit must also be God, and that if the Father and the Son are persons, then the Spirit must also be a person.

So the grammatical construction strongly suggests a Triune Deity, if it does not prove it altogether. Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity does not rest on what we can derive from this verse alone, but it is the consistent teaching of the Bible. Right now, the point is that the Christian religion is one in which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinctively three but essentially one, and in which the Son is God and the Spirit is a person. This makes our religion very specific and exclusive, and among other things, it is this doctrine of the Trinity that makes it Christian.

And if disciples are to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, how can we make disciples without affirming and teaching the Trinity? We must recognize it as one of the controlling elements in a distinctively Christian theology. Furthermore, if disciples are to be baptized in this name, it is impossible to recognize those who deny the Trinity as Christians at all. To say that it is crucial for the Christian message to be Trinitarian is also to say that it is crucial for the Christian message to be truly Christian in the first place.

This first requirement alone effectively excludes Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and all groups that claim to be Christian but that deny the Trinity. But this is just one requirement, and not the only one, so that even if a group appears to be Trinitarian, it still does not necessarily make it a Christian group. Roman Catholicism affirms the Trinity, but on every other essential issue it contradicts the Christian faith, whether we are talking about hamartiology (sin), soteriology (election, justification, sanctification), ecclesiology (church government, biblical authority, the sacraments), or eschatology (purgatory, heaven, hell). Catholicism is a thoroughgoing enemy of Christianity – the two must never be identified.

Second, our message must be *comprehensive*. Jesus says that we are to disciple the nations by teaching them "to obey everything" that he commanded. This is, again, why we say that a disciple is a *total* student, since it is not enough for us to teach people to memorize the teachings of Scripture, but we must also make sure that they obey all of them.

We cannot limit the "everything" in "everything I commanded you" as referring only to the red-letter portions of the Gospels, since the whole of the Gospels reflect the teachings of Christ, and not only the direct quotations. We cannot limit "everything" even to the Gospels themselves, since Jesus acknowledged the authority of the Old Testament and taught from it. Then, he told the disciples that he had "much more to say" (John 16:12) to them that they could not yet bear, and that he would later send the Holy Spirit to transmit from him to them these additional teachings (John 16:13-15).

Paul explained that he spoke "in words taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:13), and that what he wrote was "the Lord's command" (1 Corinthians 14:37). He said that he proclaimed "the whole will of God" (Acts 20:27) and held nothing back. An important passage from Colossians explains his thinking. There he writes, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me" (1:28-29).

The apostle was not interested in preaching the bare minimum, and he was not aiming to produce people who were barely Christians. He was interested in presenting everyone "perfect in Christ," and it was to *this* end that he labored. In fact, according to the Great Commission, the bare minimum that we must teach all nations is *everything* – the whole biblical revelation, and all that is Christianity.

One of the most important things for the church to realize is that the Great Commission is certainly not "evangelism," that is, in the narrow way that we often use the word, but it is to "make disciples," to baptize them in the Triune name and to teach them *everything* that God has revealed in the Bible. "Evangelism" is just one of the first steps on the way to fulfilling the Great Commission. Thus a church whose primary objective is "evangelism" is also a church that defies Christ's Great Commission to his face. To make our main focus "evangelism" is to refuse to obey the better part of the Great Commission.

Although he was not as harsh, Lloyd-Jones was just as clear on this point in one of his sermons on Romans:

'The gospel of his Son' does not merely mean evangelism – and I think you will agree that this needs to be emphasized at this time. I think there is a real danger at present that all the energy of the church should be given to evangelism. Does anybody misunderstand that, or think I am saying that there should be no evangelism? I am saying the exact opposite. All I am saying is that the activity of the church should not be *only* evangelistic. I think there is a real danger at the present time that

the emphasis on evangelism may become an exclusive emphasis, with the church always evangelizing, and stopping at that. That way lies disaster. No! The gospel of God's Son starts with the evangelistic message, but it does not stop there. It goes on to teach – and, indeed, teaching is a part of the evangelizing if it is to be true evangelism. Indeed, let me put it like this – all the profound doctrines of the Epistle to the Romans come under the heading of 'the gospel of his Son'. All is the good news from beginning to end, and nothing must be left out. (*Romans, Chapter 1: The Gospel of God*; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985; 219-220.)

Today, the world is unfamiliar with Christian teachings. We cannot assume that our hearers possess any biblical knowledge, and still less can we assume that they already agree with us on certain points and that we only need to address the differences. This is because non-Christians really have no biblical knowledge, but many prejudices, assumptions, and misunderstandings. This applies even to those who live in a nation with a Christian heritage like the United States. And it also applies to the church, as it seems that nowadays we cannot even assume monotheism with those who claim to be Christians.

Therefore, it is not enough to preach "The Four Spiritual Laws" or some other message that is incomplete and disconnected with the whole system of biblical revelation. Of course God can convert a person with less than the whole system of truth, and then lead this person to continue in his learning, but right now we are not considering what God can do, but what we have been told to do.

So, in general the best way for you to approach a non-Christian is to first provide a summary of the whole biblical worldview, adapting the length and depth of the presentation to the amount of time available and to other variables. Then, as Providence arranges additional opportunities, you must expound on the points that you mentioned in the summary.

This actually makes "evangelism" the first step to a complete discipleship program. Now if the person refuses to believe, he would probably terminate the discussion at some point. But if God has chosen him for salvation and has opened his heart, then at some point in your teaching program, this person will be converted. Although some things might need to change in how you relate to him, there would be no drastic shift in your program, since he would already be on the discipleship track. It matters little whether conversion takes place at your first discussion, or whether it happens months later after many discussions. The main thrust of the method remains the same.

What topics must we address in our preaching? With Jews who claim to believe the Old Testament, you can include a presentation of biblical theology, or a "history of redemption" aspect in your message. Consider Stephen's example in Acts 7. Most of the people that you will face, including those who claim to be Christians, will be unfamiliar

or hostile to the biblical worldview. Therefore, you will need a logical outline that covers the main topics. Paul provides an example of this in Acts 17:22-31.

Since I have produced a detailed exposition of Acts 17 in my *Presuppositional Confrontations* in which I defended my interpretation of the passage, I will not repeat what I wrote, but will assume here what I have established there. In addition, since our goal is to derive a simple outline of the Christian message, we will ignore some of the details in the passage, such as the citations from pagan poets, because I have also addressed these in that previous work.

Paul started by saying that he would tell his hearers what they did not know. Thus he declared the message from a position of authority and knowledge, as an official herald of God, and not as just another confused seeker on the quest for truth. He found the truth in Jesus, but his hearers had not. He knew the truth, but his hearers did not, and he was there to teach them.

But how did Paul know? How did he learn the truth? By the sovereign grace of God, who opened his spiritual eyes, he learned it from the Scripture and from the revelation of Jesus Christ. Now we have the same Scripture that he had, and we also have what he learned from Christ and wrote down for us. Therefore, we have the same message, the same knowledge, and the same fullness of revelation.

When we speak to non-Christians, we speak from the Scripture, and thus a position of prophetic and apostolic authority, and a position of knowledge. The non-Christians are in a position of wickedness and ignorance. This is offensive to the non-Christians, but it should not be so to Christians. If this offends you, the Great Commission will not make sense to you, and it will go against the sensibilities of your wicked mind, and you will not be able to obey it.

Then, on this foundation, we observe that Paul's message coherently touches on a wide range of topics: theology (idolatry, God, creation, providence), anthropology (creation, common descent, cultural mandate), hamartiology (ignorance, repentance, judgment), christology (election, resurrection), soteriology (calling, repentance), eschatology (justice, judgment, resurrection). In other words, Paul spoke on God, man, sin, Christ, salvation, and the consummation (which includes the resurrection and judgment).

This resembles a standard systematic theology outline, not only when it comes to the topics covered, but also the order in which they are addressed. Contrary to one objection against systematic theology, the discipline is not arbitrary, but biblical and logical. Of course the topics interpenetrate, and of course no presentation – adapted to the situation, the audience, and the speaker – is completely "clean" and rigid, but it is unmistakable that Paul gave a presentation of what we would call systematic theology. This is the answer to what we must include in our preaching, and how we should organize it.

Such an outline is most useful in directing a positive presentation of Christian theology, but we can also translate it into philosophical terms to make it even more adaptable. It

might look something like this: epistemology, metaphysics, morality, soteriology, and eschatology.

Why would we need a philosophical outline? In a positive presentation of the faith, there is indeed no need for it; in fact, the theological outline would be better for that purpose. However, the theological outline cannot be directly used to engage the non-Christian in that he might not have the corresponding categories in his thinking. A person who has never heard of Christ is not going to have much of a christology; however, he is most likely going to have a view of right and wrong (even if he believes that there is no right and no wrong), and an opinion on the solution for the wrongs in humanity – that is, what it is that will "save" humanity. When pressed to think about it, he might also have a view concerning the final fate of humanity, individually and corporately speaking.

Thus a philosophical outline is broader, and it can guide the engagement between the biblical worldview and the non-biblical worldview. It can direct the positive presentation of the biblical worldview, as well as to guide the Christian in asking the right questions and mapping the non-Christian worldview, for the purpose of refutation. But I will repeat that the theological outline is superior for a positive presentation of the biblical worldview, since it is more detailed and specific, and useful in ensuring a complete and coherent presentation.

Yet another outline can be derived from Acts 17. Even if it is unnecessary to reduce our outline to a simpler one, this one is useful if for no other reason than that it is easy to remember: authority, reality, morality, and mortality. The "authority," of course, refers to the controlling epistemological principle that produces and restricts the rest of the system. To discuss mortality is to discuss the person's view of death, of the end, and where the preceding items of his philosophy lead him.

Although a person may roughly follow such an outline in a monologue, a rigid plan is usually not possible in a conversation. Each topic implies the others, and the discussion will roam back and forth between the major issues. To illustrate, if the non-Christian's view of *reality* denies an incorporeal soul, then this will affect his view of *mortality*, and probably even *morality*. And if he denies the soul, we can ask him, by what *authority* does he know?

The outline can also facilitate engagement. If the non-Christian affirms the *authority* of science, how does this relate to your belief in the authority of Scripture? Does scientific authority refute biblical authority? If so, how? Or is science itself in trouble, so that it has no authority to tell us anything about reality, morality, and mortality? So the interrelatedness of the topics is not a problem, and a linear discussion is unnecessary, as long as each major area is covered in some depth.

3. THE ABIDING PRESENCE

If the act of evangelism is offensive to the non-Christians, the message is even more scandalous. It clashes with their belief systems at every point and on every issue. It is intrusive, subversive, an insult, and an omen. To those created for salvation, it is a "fragrance of life," but to those whom God has created for damnation, it is the very "smell of death." Such a ministry is not to be taken lightly. As Paul asks, "Who is equal to such a task?" (2 Corinthians 2:16).

Now, it is irritating when preachers and theologians cite a statement from the Bible that seems to lead toward one direction, when the same Bible immediately answers it in order to point toward the opposite direction. One of the best illustrations is 1 Corinthians 2:9, which says, "However, as it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.'" Many Christians stop here, and this gives the opposite impression of what Paul is saying, since he continues, "But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit" (v. 10).

We do know what God has prepared for those who love him. No eye has seen it, but God has revealed it. No ear has heard it, but God has made it known. No mind has conceived it, but God has taught it to us. How? By his Spirit. That is the point, so if we are not going to quote verse 10, then we should not quote verse 9, either. The passage does not assert mystery but knowledge, not hiddenness, but revelation.

Something similar has been done to 2 Corinthians 2:16. Preachers and theologians lament, "Oh! Who is equal to such a task?" But Paul does not leave us in despair, since almost immediately, he says, "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:5-6). We were not competent in ourselves, but God has made us competent as ministers of the covenant by his Spirit.

Our problem is that Christ has given us a seemingly impossible task. He has commanded us to do something that people find intrusive in order to tell them something that they find offensive. He requires us to do something that he knows is difficult and sometimes dangerous.

But the Lord does not leave us helpless and hopeless. When Jeremiah said, "Ah, Sovereign LORD...I do not know how to speak; I am only a child," the Lord answered, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you.... Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land.

They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you" (Jeremiah 1:6-8, 18-19, but also see v. 17).

Here we have the greatest of promises in the Great Commission – Jesus says, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." The pronoun "I" is included in the verb, but it is spoken as a separate word for emphasis, as if to say, "I, even I, and no one less than I myself, will always be with you." Not someone else, not an angel, not a force, but Christ himself will lead and accompany us as we obey the Great Commission.

The Great Commission would be impossible without Christ's presence, since the task is to make disciples, but only he can change human hearts. Only he has the power to directly control the mind of man, and to turn it in whatever direction he chooses. Without this spiritual power to fill our preaching, and to make it effective, no one would ever be converted.

Paul writes that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing" (1 Corinthians 1:18). This is not because the gospel is indeed foolish from a rational perspective, but it is because non-Christians are so stupid, so irrational, and their minds have been so darkened and damaged that it is impossible for them to recognize true wisdom. Their reference points are so far from the truth that even the highest wisdom would appear to them as the greatest falsehood, and the most absurd foolishness. Their intellects are so crippled that they cannot appreciate even the plainest proofs and the keenest arguments.

We can offer proofs and reasons, and the Spirit will often use them in his work of conversion and sanctification. But in themselves, even the soundest arguments, those that are irrefutable and undeniable, cannot convince non-Christians of the truth of the gospel, because their minds have been ravaged by sin, so that there are moral and intellectual barriers in them that are impenetrable by ordinary human speech, however true and sound it may be. Non-Christians are too stubborn to listen, and too stupid to understand.

This is why conversion requires a spiritual power to directly operate upon the human mind, and to undo sin's hold on it at the deepest level. This is what we call regeneration, and when the Spirit regenerates one of God's chosen ones, he also grants to this person faith in the gospel. And so Paul writes, "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God....For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:4, 6-7).

Paul reminds the Thessalonians that the gospel came to them "with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5), and he says to the Corinthians, "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:4-5). Since I have written a fairly detailed

exposition of the two passages in *Ultimate Questions*, I will do nothing more than to mention them here. For our purpose, it is enough to agree that we need spiritual power to effectively carry out the work of the gospel, and the good news is that this power is promised to us along with the Great Commission.

This spiritual power is not something that you can work up. You cannot manipulate it with your voice, your mannerisms, your personality, or your willpower. You cannot increase or control it even by much prayer, but we are talking about the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. Your part is to make the message clear, and the Spirit will work in accordance with the will of God.

The promise of God's presence and power does not mean that all who hear you will believe – far from it. Although all are morally required to repent and believe the gospel, and those who reject the gospel will be punished for it, it is not given to all to repent and believe, but only those whom God has chosen and loved before the foundation of the world. The Spirit will work in these people, and he will regenerate and convert them. They will welcome you with joy and with open arms. On the other hand, others will oppose you, slander you, and revile you. But even then the Spirit is at work, hardening those whom he wishes to harden, directly and actively confirming evil in their hearts.

If they have thought about it very much at all, most Christians have a woefully inadequate theology of spiritual power, one that not only fails to fully acknowledge the work of the Spirit in conversion and sanctification, but that fails even more in squarely confronting the claims of power from the occult, witchcraft, false religions, and demon worship.

Some people take the position that demonic powers are not real, and that Satan has no actual supernatural power. But the word "supernatural" is often ambiguous. Although not all of them would go this far, some of them would clarify this by saying that all apparent demonstrations of satanic powers are in fact illusions. This position seems awfully naïve unless its truth is established by solid biblical exegesis, but so far I am unconvinced by the attempts. And if the meaning is that Satan indeed has power to manipulate physical objects and forces, but he can do nothing more, or as some say, that he has superhuman power but no supernatural power, then we still need to formulate a biblical perspective from which to confront this.

Sometimes it is pointed out that Scripture refers to "false" signs and wonders. From this, inferences have been made concerning the nature of satanic "miracles," that perhaps they are not supernatural but only superhuman, or perhaps they are in fact nothing more than natural illusions that any party magician could produce. But we need more than this, since "false" has several meanings, and to call someone a "false" prophet does not mean that the person does not exist, but that religiously speaking, he represents a false message. A "false" religion is still a religion, but its message is untrue.

Likewise, the term "lying" signs does not necessarily indicate the lack of supernatural power, because it might be that the lie is in the accompanying message, and not that the

signs are mere illusions. Moreover, even if some of these "false" miracles are in fact illusions, and not supernatural, it does not automatically mean that all such miracles are nothing more than natural illusions.

When it comes to demonic powers, the biblical perspective is not to deny them, or to deny that they are supernatural, but to assert the superiority of God's power. This does not mean that all satanic signs are necessarily real, in the sense that they are supernatural wonders rather than illusions, but that the Bible does not confront them from this perspective.

The Bible relates many instances of power encounters between God's followers and Satan's followers. When Moses confronted Pharaoh's magicians, he threw down his staff and it turned into a serpent. The magicians threw down theirs, and they turned into serpents as well. Whether or not the magicians performed mere illusions, and that their staffs in fact never turned into actual serpents, or that by a sleight of hand they exchanged the staffs for serpents, is not the most important aspect of the issue. The point to be grasped and applied is that Moses' staff, transformed into a serpent, consumed the staffs or serpents of the magicians. From this perspective, it matters little whether or not Satan's followers possess real supernatural power. What matters is that God's power is always real and triumphant.

Let me tell you the story of a Wiccan. It happened when I was still a teenager in high school. At that time, I preached every Sunday to a group of adults off campus. There was a Bible study group on campus that met every Wednesday night, but I had no contact with it. Until that time, I had never preached to other teenagers except for several private discussions with friends.

Then, one day I ran into the sister of a friend from junior high. Now she was attending the same high school as I was, although her brother had gone somewhere else. He had told her about me, and I also knew about her. As we talked, she mentioned that she was going to the school's Bible study. She invited me to go, but when I hesitated, she suggested that I meet with the group's faculty supervisor. Maybe he could make the group sound more appealing and change my mind about it.

So I went to meet the supervisor. We got along very well, mainly because he was an especially sociable and hospitable man, and more than a little jovial as well. He opened his on-campus home every day so that Christian students could pray and socialize with one another. For the next several weeks, we met a number of times, and after he found out more about me, some of the things that I had been doing, and perhaps some of my strengths, he invited me to address his Bible study group.

The group gatherings were designed to be "seeker-friendly." In fact, it was so "friendly" that, as I later found out, a Wiccan girl had been attending the meetings all year and felt completely at home there. Later, I would discover that the faculty supervisor had asked her why she was going to all those meetings when she had no intention of becoming a

Christian, and when she was not convicted or disturbed by anything that was said there. Her answer was, "I like the songs."

Imagine the kind of atmosphere they provided for those who went. No one felt threatened or challenged in any way, and that was the way they designed it. So, now knowing a little about the kind of person I was, the kind of things that I was likely to say, and the way I was probably going to say them, the faculty supervisor and student leaders, although expectant, were at the same time a little apprehensive about my appearance.

It was a rather bold decision for the supervisor. There could have been great trouble, and a lot was on the line. Although I thought that he was too "soft," and told him so, he had already been receiving pressure from the school for encouraging so much talk about Christianity on campus, even if it was a seeker-friendly and watered-down variety. What I was going to do and say there, at his invitation, could have put his job at even greater risk. Perhaps he thought that I had something that his group needed, but for whatever reason, he decided to turn me loose despite the danger.

As for me, the incident presented a number of personal challenges that I had to overcome. Later, I realized that the incident marked a turning point in my faith and ministry, not because of what happened when I addressed the group, but because of what it took for me to get there. But that is another story, and it would take too long for me to tell you what happened.

The day finally came, and after singing several songs and a few minutes of Bible reading, the supervisor gave a short introduction and I stood up to speak. I talked about what the group needed to hear most – biblical supernaturalism. I affirmed the creation account against biological evolution, and the historicity of the Eden narrative against the mythological theories. I spoke about the inerrancy of Scripture and affirmed that the miracles in the Bible indeed happened. I condemned the liberal scholars in "cemeteries" (seminaries) who were subverting the faith that these teenagers were trying to follow, or at least trying to investigate. It was indeed a "seeker-friendly" speech – I am sure it was pleasant to those who were really seeking the truth. To the rest, it was a sound of condemnation and an aroma of death.

The general reaction was very positive. The Christians became excited and encouraged in the faith. One of the student leaders told me in jest that the Spirit must have been upon me, since he thought that I was unusually lively – he thought I was often too serious.

But not everyone was entertained. The next day, that Wiccan girl went to the faculty supervisor and told him that, as I started to speak, she felt a power took hold of her and physically shook her, and it continued throughout the night until the morning. She was convicted, and very afraid, and she went to the supervisor for an explanation. Of course, I could not have manipulated the situation to make this happen, as I was unaware that there was such a person in the audience until I was told about her later.

I can tell you many stories like this one, some of them much more spectacular than this, in which the Spirit of God worked on people in ways that were beyond my awareness and control. But this incident is especially relevant because it presents to us a contrast between two approaches and their respective results. On the one hand, there was a seeker-friendly environment in which even a Wiccan could sit there week after week for almost a whole year without so much as a twitch in conscience. Then, on the other, there was a forceful declaration of the truth of Scripture, the historical reality of creation, and the miracles and resurrection of Christ, together with an unapologetic condemnation of non-Christian theories. The promise of the former is the acceptance of man, but the reward of the latter is the visitation of the Spirit. One welcomes you with a hug and a pat on the back; the other confronts you with truth and power.

Imagine! The Wiccan girl did not believe, but she liked the songs! For months she had been singing:

Deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, deep, down, down,
deep down in my heart, I love you Jesus!
Deep down in my heart.

Some of you would consider a song like this too shallow, and you would be right, especially if you only sing songs like this one. Nevertheless, this is something that a Christian could sing with meaning – I *do* love Jesus deep down in my heart. "Oh Happy Day" is not deep worship, or not worship at all, but it is enough to move me to tears. It *was* a "happy day" when "he washed my sins away."

However, "Oh Happy Day" was not about to convert that Wiccan girl, and she did not love Jesus deep down in her heart, or anywhere in her person. She was just having fun and enjoying the melodies. Everybody was comfortable, and the only person offended was God.

But then, and not until then, someone came along and preached the gospel to her, and perhaps for the first time made her realize that there was a person and a power associated with this message that she had encountered before. She was made to realize that there was something wrong with her that she could not fix herself, and that she needed salvation from God.

Paul writes that he is not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God to save all those who believe. If we will not be ashamed of the gospel, then Christ will not be ashamed of us, and neither will we be ashamed of ourselves at the judgment. But what is there to be ashamed of in the gospel? What promise! What power! What beauty! What perfect coherence! It is easy to have confidence in the gospel.

For the Christian who embraces the Great Commission, and who obeys it in faith, love, joy, and duty to the Lord, the power of God in all its fullness is a present and active reality. I can preach with confidence and teach with authority every time, and in any context, because I know that the power of the Lord Jesus Christ is with me. On a

subjective level, my confidence rests on the call of God upon my life, which is more real to me than my own name. It occupies my consciousness at all times, and defines all of my thoughts, plans, and actions. But the objective basis for confidence is even stronger. It is the biblical revelation of God's eternal purpose and his sovereign power to perform it. He will have mercy on those whom he will have mercy, and he will harden those whom he wishes to harden. He will accomplish his will, and there is no chance for failure. With the same message, he will save the elect and slay the wicked. And because this pleases him, it pleases me as well.