

THE GREAT COMMISSION

An Exhaustive Biblical and Doctrinal Study

Matthew 28:18–20 · Mark 16:15–16 · Luke 24:44–49 · John 20:21–23 · Acts 1:8

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Section 1 — Introduction and Historical Background

The phrase "Great Commission" does not appear in Scripture but is the church's traditional label for the risen Christ's final, authoritative command to His disciples to make disciples of all nations. It is not a single text but a cluster of five post-resurrection commissions, each with distinct emphases, all converging on a single missional reality: the reign of the exalted Son of Man now extends to every people-group, and His church is the instrument by which that reign advances through Word, Sacrament, and Spirit.

1.1 The Historical Phrase

"Great Commission" as a technical term was popularized in the early nineteenth century — widely attributed to Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), the British missionary to China, though earlier usage traces to scholars like Herman Hoornbeek (1617–1666) and the Pietist tradition. The Reformation-era Reformed world had long recognized the binding authority of Matthew 28:18–20 upon the church, though some within strict Calvinist circles controversially debated whether the commission applied only to the original apostles. William Carey's 1792 treatise *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* demolished the restrictivist view exegetically and missionally.

1.2 The Five Commission Texts

The Great Commission is not a single event but five distinct post-resurrection appearances each containing a commissioning element:

- Matthew 28:18–20 — The mountain in Galilee; authority, disciple-making, baptism, teaching, presence
- Mark 16:15–16 — Proclamation of the gospel to all creation; belief and baptism as the decisive markers
- Luke 24:44–49 — Fulfillment of Scripture; repentance and forgiveness preached to all nations; the promise of the Spirit as clothing of power
- John 20:21–23 — "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you"; the Spirit breathed; authority to pronounce forgiveness and retention of sins
- Acts 1:4–8 — The final pre-ascension charge; the geography of witness: Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, the end of the earth

✦ Theological Note

While critical scholars have questioned the authenticity of the longer ending of Mark (16:9–20), the commissioning content of 16:15–16 is consistent with the theology and vocabulary of all four Gospels and Acts. The church has historically read these five texts as a unified missional mandate.

Section 2 — Greek Analysis of the Primary Text: Matthew 28:18–20

Matthew 28:18–20 (ESV)

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

2.1 Verse 18 — The Foundation of Authority

ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία (edothē moi pasa exousia)

"All authority has been given to me" — The verb ἐδόθη (edothē) is aorist passive indicative, first person singular of δίδωμι. The passive form indicates the Father as the agent of bestowal — this is not authority Jesus seized by right of divinity alone, but authority formally invested in the God-Man at the resurrection/exaltation, fulfilling Daniel 7:13–14 (the Son of Man receiving dominion from the Ancient of Days). This is the ground of the command: because all authority is now His, He has the right to commission His servants to all nations.

πᾶσα ἐξουσία — "all authority." Not partial or regional authority, but total, cosmic jurisdiction. ἐξουσία (exousia) denotes delegated, legitimate power (cf. John 17:2; Philippians 2:9–11). The resurrection is not merely Jesus's personal vindication but the inauguration of His universal reign.

"In heaven and on earth" — ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. This merism (heaven + earth = everything) echoes Genesis 1:1 and Psalm 2:8. The exalted Christ's reign is not confined to the spiritual realm; it encompasses all created reality. This is essential: the Commission is not a retreat from the world but an advance under a triumphant King.

2.2 Verse 19 — The Main Verb: Make Disciples

μαθητεύσατε (mathēteusate) — The Imperative

The Greek construction of v. 19 contains one main imperative and three participial phrases:

- μαθητεύσατε (mathēteusate) — aorist active imperative, 2nd person plural: "make disciples." This is the ONLY imperative in vv. 19–20. It is the central command.
- πορευθέντες (poreuthentes) — aorist passive participle: "as you go" / "going." Not a separate command but an attendant circumstance. The translation "Go therefore" in some versions can obscure this; a more wooden rendering is "having gone" or "as you are going." The commission is carried out in the course of movement, not as a static institutional program.
- βαπτίζοντες (baptizontes) — present active participle: "baptizing." One of the two means by which disciple-making occurs — the initiatory rite of entrance into the covenant community and trinitarian identity.

- διδάσκοντες (didaskontes) — present active participle: "teaching." The second means: ongoing instruction in all that Christ has commanded. Discipleship is not conversion alone but comprehensive formation.

πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (panta ta ethnē) — All Nations

The scope of the commission is panta ta ethnē — "all the nations" or "all the ethnic peoples." Ethnē (plural of ἔθνος, ethnos) can mean Gentiles as a class (Jews vs. Gentiles) or distinct people-groups (nations). The context here is the latter: Jesus commands disciple-making among every distinct ethnolinguistic group. This is the exegetical basis for the modern "unreached peoples" missiology of the 20th century (Donald McGavran, Ralph Winter).

Notably, this contrasts sharply with Jesus's earlier mission restriction in Matthew 10:5–6 ("Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"). The resurrection marks the end of the particularist stage of redemptive history; the covenant people now expands by gospel proclamation to every tongue, tribe, and nation (Revelation 5:9; 7:9).

εἰς τὸ ὄνομα (eis to onoma) — Into the Name

Baptizing "in (εἰς) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The preposition εἰς ("into") is theologically dense: it signifies not merely that the Name is spoken over the baptized, but that the baptized person is brought into relation with and under the ownership of the Triune God. The singular ὄνομα (onoma, "name") — not the plural ὀνόματα — with three co-equal persons named indicates the ontological unity of the three Persons in one divine Being. This is the most explicit trinitarian formula in the Synoptics and has been the baptismal formula of the church since the Didache (c. AD 50–120).

2.3 Verse 20 — The Binding Promise

ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι (idou egō meth' hymōn eimi)

"And behold, I am with you always." This is the climactic promise of the entire pericope and of Matthew's Gospel as a whole. Matthew opens with the name Immanuel (God with us, 1:23) and closes with this promise of permanent presence. The construction ἐγὼ εἰμι (I am) echoes the divine name of Exodus 3:14. The word πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας (pasas tas hēmeras — "all the days") is more emphatic in Greek than the English "always": every single day, without exception.

"To the end of the age" — ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος (heōs tēs synteleyias tou aiōnos). This phrase occurs five times in Matthew (13:39, 40, 49; 24:3; 28:20). It frames the commission within eschatological urgency: the mission has a terminal horizon. The age has an end; until that end, the church is under commission and the Lord is present.

✦ Theological Note

The Reformed tradition (Calvin, Warfield, Vos) has observed that the structure of Matt. 28:18–20 mirrors the logic of the Davidic covenant: authority → commission → presence. The Son of David receives all

authority (2 Sam. 7:12–14; Psalm 2), sends forth His servants, and promises to dwell with them permanently (John 14:16–18). The Great Commission is the Davidic covenant in its eschatological fulfillment.

Section 3 — Mark 16:15–16 and the Textual Question

Mark 16:15–16 (ESV)

"Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

3.1 The Textual Problem of the Longer Ending

The "longer ending" of Mark (16:9–20) is absent from the two oldest and most reliable Greek manuscripts (Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, both 4th century) and from important early patristic witnesses. Eusebius and Jerome acknowledge that most manuscripts available in their day lacked the longer ending. Internal linguistic analysis identifies 17 non-Markan terms within the passage.

However, the longer ending appears in the vast majority of Greek manuscripts (including the Western tradition and the Byzantine textual tradition) and was known to Irenaeus (c. AD 180) and Tatian (c. AD 170). The church has historically included it in the canonical text, and its theology is consistent with the rest of the NT. Most conservative scholars treat it as historically authentic apostolic tradition even if uncertain of Markan authorship.

3.2 Proclamation to All Creation

κηρύξατε τὸ εὐαγγέλιον πάσῃ τῇ κτίσει (kēryxate to euangelion pasē tē ktisei)

"Proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." The verb κηρύσσω (kēryssō) means to herald or proclaim publicly — the act of a royal herald announcing the king's decree. The object is πᾶσα ἡ κτίσις ("the whole creation"), a phrase echoing Romans 8:19–22 (the creation groaning in anticipation) and Colossians 1:23 ("the gospel... proclaimed in all creation under heaven").

This Markan formulation is broader than Matthew's "all nations": the gospel has cosmic scope. Its proclamation is the announcement of the new creation order inaugurated by Christ's resurrection — death and decay have met their conqueror (Romans 8:20–21; 2 Corinthians 5:17).

3.3 Belief, Baptism, and Salvation — The Grammatical Issue

"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." This verse has generated significant controversy regarding the relationship of baptism to salvation. A careful grammatical analysis is essential:

- The condition for condemnation is "whoever does not believe" — not "whoever is not baptized." Disbelief alone condemns; the absence of baptism is not independently cited.
- The condition for salvation names both belief and baptism together — but the structure does not require that baptism is the instrument of salvation. Jesus is naming the normative pattern: those who believe normally are also baptized.
- Reformed exegesis (Ridderbos, Lenski, Carson) reads "believes and is baptized" as a hendiadys: baptism as the public expression and seal of faith, not its meritorious cause.

- Baptist exegesis similarly: baptism here is the outward confession and profession of the inner reality of faith, as in Romans 10:9 ("confess with your mouth").

✦ **Theological Note**

The sacramentalist reading (baptismal regeneration — Schreiner's critique) requires that Mark 16:16b be ignored and that this verse be read in isolation from the rest of NT soteriology. The whole canonical witness (John 3:16; Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8–9; 1 Peter 3:21 with its own denial of baptismal regeneration) militates against deriving *ex opere operato* sacramentalism from this text.

Section 4 — Luke 24:44–49: Fulfillment, Witness, and the Spirit

Luke 24:44–49 (ESV)

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

4.1 The Hermeneutical Key: Everything in the Scriptures

Luke's commission is distinctively hermeneutical. Before issuing any command, Christ opens the disciples' minds to understand that the entire OT — Law, Prophets, and Psalms (the threefold Hebrew canon) — converges on Him. This means the Great Commission is not an afterthought at the end of Jesus's ministry; it is the telos of the whole redemptive-historical narrative of Scripture.

The verb "opened" (διήνοιξεν, diēnoixen) is the same root used for the opened eyes of the Emmaus disciples (Luke 24:31) — Luke signals that understanding Scripture requires divine illumination, a fundamentally important point for missional hermeneutics. The disciples do not deduce the commission by reason; they receive it by revelation.

4.2 The Threefold Content of the Proclamation

Verse 46–47 identifies three things written in Scripture and now to be proclaimed:

- The suffering of Christ — fulfilled in the cross (Isaiah 53; Psalm 22; Zechariah 12:10)
- The resurrection on the third day — (Hosea 6:2; Jonah 1:17; Psalm 16:10)
- Repentance for the forgiveness of sins proclaimed in His name to all nations — the content of the Great Commission itself is embedded in OT prophecy (Isaiah 49:6; Isaiah 52:10; Psalm 2:8; Genesis 12:3)

μετάνοια (metanoia) — Repentance

Luke's commission uniquely foregrounds μετάνοια — repentance — as the primary content of the proclamation. The word means a change of mind and direction, a complete reorientation of one's allegiance. Luke's Gospel is pervasively concerned with repentance (15:7, 10; 16:30; 17:3–4; 19:8). Significantly, the Acts narrative is structured around calls to repentance: Acts 2:38, 3:19, 5:31, 11:18, 17:30, 20:21, 26:20.

"Forgiveness of sins" (ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν, aphasis hamartiōn) — ἄφεσις (aphesis) literally means release or liberation, the cancellation of a debt. This is the full gospel: humanity is indebted to a holy God, and Christ's atoning work releases the believing penitent from that obligation. The

forgiveness is "in his name" (ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ) — it is not generic divine amnesty but specific atonement applied to those who call on the name of Jesus.

4.3 Beginning from Jerusalem

"Beginning from Jerusalem" — ἀρχάμενοι ἀπὸ Ἱερουσαλήμ. This geographical marker is theologically loaded. Jerusalem is the place of Jesus's rejection, crucifixion, and burial — and now it is the starting point of gospel proclamation. The mission begins where the crime was committed and where the victim rose. This inverts every expectation: God's redemptive strategy is to establish His kingdom from the epicenter of opposition, not despite it.

Jerusalem also fulfills Isaiah 2:3: "For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem." The Acts pattern (Jerusalem → Judea → Samaria → end of earth, Acts 1:8) begins the centrifugal movement outward that Luke will trace through his second volume.

4.4 Clothed with Power from on High

"Clothed with power from on high" — ἐνδύσησθε ἐξ ὕψους δύναμιν (endysēsthe ex hypsous dynamin). The image is of a garment — the Spirit is not a supplementary optional equipment but something that envelops and covers the whole person. The disciples cannot execute the commission in their own power; they must wait (μείνατε — remain!) until the Spirit arrives. This is a mandatory element of the Lukan commission: the mission and the Spirit are inseparable.

✦ Theological Note

The Lukan commission is the most explicitly trinitarian in structure: the Son (who suffered and rose) sends His witnesses in the power of the Spirit who is the "promise of the Father" (ἡ ἐπαγγελία τοῦ πατρὸς, Acts 2:33). The Great Commission is inherently a Trinitarian act — the Father promises, the Son commands, the Spirit empowers.

Section 5 — John 20:21–23: Sent as the Father Sent the Son

John 20:21–23 (ESV)

Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."

5.1 The Pattern of Mission: ἀποστέλλω and πέμπω

John's commission employs two distinct Greek verbs for "send": ἀποστέλλω (apostellō) for the Father's sending of the Son, and πέμπω (pempō) for Jesus's sending of the disciples. Some scholars distinguish these (apostellō = official commissioning with full authority; pempō = more general sending), though in Johannine usage they often overlap. What is crucial is the analogical structure: the mission of the disciples is modeled on and grounded in the mission of the Son.

This is the most theologically dense commission: the disciples' sending participates in the very logic of the trinitarian missions. The Son was sent by the Father incarnationally — entering the world, taking on flesh, living in complete obedience, laying down His life. The disciples are now sent in the same spirit of self-giving, incarnational witness. This is the theological basis for a whole theology of mission as participation in the missio Dei (mission of God).

5.2 The Breath of the Spirit — New Creation Echo

ἐνεφύσησεν (enephysēsen)

Jesus "breathed on them" — the word ἐνεφυσάω (enephysaō) occurs only twice in the entire LXX and NT: here and in Genesis 2:7 (God breathing the breath of life into Adam). This is deliberate Johannine theology: the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the new creation (cf. John 19:41; 20:1 — "the first day of the week" echoing "Day 1" of Genesis 1), and the Spirit breathed on the disciples is the Spirit of that new creation.

This anticipatory gift of the Spirit (before Pentecost) is understood by many as a symbolic act pointing forward to Acts 2, not a full bestowal of the Spirit's Pentecostal power. Calvin: "Christ gave the disciples a foretaste and pledge of that grace which He would abundantly pour out after His ascension." The full empowerment awaited the gift of the Father (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:1–4).

5.3 Forgiveness and Retention of Sins — The Keys of the Kingdom

"If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld." This is a commissioning of apostolic authority, closely paralleling Matthew 16:19 (the keys of the kingdom) and 18:18 (whatever you bind/loose on earth is bound/loosed in heaven).

Three major interpretive traditions:

- Roman Catholic: This verse establishes priestly absolution — the ordained priest, acting in persona Christi, pronounces sacramental forgiveness for confessed sins (the basis of the sacrament of penance/reconciliation).
- Lutheran: This authority belongs to the church's proclamation ministry — when the church preaches the gospel, it announces God's forgiveness; when it preaches the law, it announces God's wrath. The "keys" are the proclamation of law and gospel.
- Reformed/Baptist: This is authority for church discipline (Matthew 18:15–20) — the church's formal acknowledgment or withholding of gospel assurance from individuals based on their credible profession and conduct. It is corporate and churchly, not sacerdotal.

♦ **Theological Note**

The Reformed position reads vv. 22–23 in light of the "binding and loosing" language of Matthew 16 and 18, understanding it as the church's declaratory authority rather than meritorious priestly power. The church does not create forgiveness; it announces and applies, through Word and sacrament, the forgiveness accomplished by Christ's atonement.

Section 6 — Acts 1:4–8: The Geography of Witness and the Spirit's Coming

Acts 1:4–8 (ESV)

And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

6.1 The Kingdom Question — A Misunderstood Expectation

The disciples ask: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6). This question is often read as a sign of the disciples' spiritual immaturity or confusion. But recent scholarship (especially N.T. Wright, Scot McKnight, Michael Bird) has rehabilitated the question: it is a legitimate Israelite-eschatological expectation, and Jesus does not rebuke it as wrong-headed — He redirects it.

Jesus's answer has two components:

- Temporal ignorance: "It is not for you to know times or seasons" — the timing of the consummation is hidden in the Father's sovereign authority. This is consistent with Matthew 24:36: "No one knows that day or hour."
- Missional reassignment: "You will be my witnesses" — instead of calculating the eschaton, the disciples' task is to be witnesses. The how of the kingdom's advance is witness; the when of its consummation is God's prerogative.

6.2 The Geographical Schema: Acts 1:8 as the Outline of Acts

Acts 1:8 functions as the programmatic outline of the entire book of Acts:

Geography	Acts Fulfillment	Theological Significance
Jerusalem	Acts 1–7	Mission begins at the center of rejection; Pentecost establishes the church
Judea	Acts 8:1, 11–12	Persecution scatters the church outward — suffering advances the mission
Samaria	Acts 8:4–25	Half-Gentile Samaritans receive the gospel; ethnic barriers begin to fall
End of the Earth	Acts 13–28	Gentile mission through Paul; Rome as the imperial symbol of the world's end

6.3 μάρτυρες (martyres) — Witnesses

"You will be my witnesses" — μάρτυρες (martyres), from which the English "martyr" derives. A witness in Greek judicial and cultural life is someone who testifies to what they have personally seen and heard. The disciples are not called to innovate or speculate but to testify: they have seen the risen Christ, they have handled and heard Him (1 John 1:1–3), and now they declare what they have witnessed (cf. Acts 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39; 13:31).

The semantic range of μάρτυς in the NT shifts toward costly testimony: witness that leads to suffering and death. By Revelation 2:13 and 17:6, the word is explicitly used of martyrdom. The Great Commission carried for the early church the clear awareness that faithful witness could cost one's life — and often did.

✦ Theological Note

Isaiah 43:10–12 provides the OT background: "You are my witnesses, declares the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen." Israel was called to be YHWH's witness among the nations; the church now takes up that Israelite vocation extended to the new covenant community. The Commission does not abandon Israel's calling; it fulfills it through the Messiah of Israel who has won the nations.

Section 7 — Old Testament Foundations of the Great Commission

The Great Commission does not emerge ex nihilo. It is the eschatological fulfillment of a missional trajectory that runs through the entire OT. Five key OT pillars undergird it:

7.1 The Abrahamic Covenant — Genesis 12:1–3

Genesis 12:2–3 (ESV)

"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

"All the families of the earth shall be blessed" — this is the proto-Great Commission. The word בְּרָכָה (berakah — blessing) in the niphal (passive/reflexive) implies that the nations will gain their blessing through Abraham's seed. Paul explicitly identifies this as the preaching of the gospel: "The Scripture... preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed'" (Galatians 3:8). The Great Commission is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.

7.2 The Psalms — Universal Kingship

Psalm 2 is the theological spine of the Great Commission. The Father addresses the Son (Psalm 2:7–8): "Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession." The Son's authority in Matthew 28:18 (all authority given to him) is the fulfillment of this inheritance. The Commission is the Son executing His rightful dominion through the proclamation of the gospel.

Psalm 22:27–28: "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you." The same psalm that opens with "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (quoted by Jesus on the cross) ends with this universal gathering — the cross is the ground of universal mission.

Psalm 96:3: "Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!" The Psalter itself is a missional document, calling Israel to witness to the nations.

7.3 Isaiah — The Servant and the Nations

Isaiah's servant songs are the richest OT background for the Great Commission:

- Isaiah 42:1–6: "I have given you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations" — the Servant is the mediator of a new covenant and the light for the Gentiles, a role explicitly applied to Jesus (Luke 2:32; Matthew 12:18–21) and then to Paul's Gentile mission (Acts 13:47).
- Isaiah 49:6: "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" — Paul and Barnabas quote this as their direct commission to the Gentile mission (Acts 13:47).

- Isaiah 52:7–10: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news" — this is the paradigmatic gospel text; Paul uses it in Romans 10:15 as the basis for a theology of preaching and mission.
- Isaiah 55:4–5: "I have made him a witness to the peoples... nations that did not know you shall run to you" — the Davidic king as witness to the nations, a direct parallel to Acts 1:8.
- Isaiah 66:19: "I will send survivors to the nations... and they shall declare my glory among the nations" — anticipating the universal Gentile mission.

7.4 Daniel 7:13–14 — The Son of Man's Universal Dominion

Daniel 7:13–14 (ESV)

"I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."

This is the direct OT background for Matthew 28:18: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The Son of Man receives universal dominion from the Ancient of Days — this is the exaltation at the resurrection and ascension. "All peoples, nations, and languages shall serve him" (Daniel 7:14) becomes "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) — the Gentiles' service to the Son of Man is accomplished through the church's disciple-making mission.

7.5 Jonah — The Reluctant Missionary

Jonah stands as both a cautionary tale and a foreshadowing of the Great Commission. YHWH commissions a Jewish prophet to preach to Nineveh, the Gentile capital — and the prophet flees. When he finally preaches (the shortest recorded sermon: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" — Jonah 3:4), the Ninevites repent en masse. The Great Commission reverses the Jonah pattern: instead of a reluctant prophet, there are willing witnesses; instead of one city, all nations; instead of a temporary message, the permanent gospel.

Jesus identifies Jonah's three days in the fish as a type of His own resurrection (Matthew 12:40–41) and notes that the Ninevites' repentance at Jonah's preaching is surpassed by what is now present. The Great Commission is given by one greater than Jonah — and carries a message greater than Nineveh's reprieve.

Section 8 — The Holy Spirit and the Mission: Acts 2 and Beyond

Acts 2:1–4 (ESV)

When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

8.1 Pentecost as Commission Fulfillment

Acts 2 is the inaugural fulfillment of the command to wait for the Spirit (Acts 1:4–5; Luke 24:49). Three elements of Pentecost connect directly to the Great Commission:

- The sound of wind (πνοή, pnoē) — the same word as the "breath" of Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22. This is the Spirit of the new creation empowering the new Adam's witnesses.
- Tongues of fire — the Spirit's presence with each individual disciple, not just resting on a select anointed few. The commission is for all of God's people: "your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Joel 2:28, quoted in Acts 2:17).
- Speaking in tongues (γλώσσαις, glōssais) — understood by Pentecost pilgrims from 16 named regions of the known world. This is a partial reversal of Babel (Genesis 11): where Babel scattered by confusion of language, Pentecost unites through the miracle of intelligible proclamation across language barriers. The Great Commission is linguistic: it requires crossing every language barrier, as the Spirit equips.

8.2 Peter's Sermon — The Template for Commission Proclamation

Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14–36) is the normative template for apostolic preaching in fulfillment of the Great Commission. Its structure:

- Scriptural foundation: the event is explained by Joel 2 (v. 16) and Psalms 16 and 110 (vv. 25–35)
- Historical witness: Jesus of Nazareth's life, miracles, crucifixion, and resurrection stated as historical fact (vv. 22–24)
- Theological interpretation: the resurrection vindicates Jesus as both Lord and Christ — the exalted Davidic King (vv. 32–36)
- Ethical demand: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (v. 38)
- Promise: "you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" — the Spirit is the inheritance of all who respond to the Commission

8.3 The Spirit as the Primary Missionary Agent

The book of Acts consistently presents the Spirit as the primary agent of mission, with the church as the Spirit's instrument — not vice versa. Note the pattern:

- Acts 8:29 — "The Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over and join this chariot.'" Philip does not choose the Ethiopian; the Spirit selects the encounter.
- Acts 10:19 — "The Spirit said to him, 'Behold, three men are looking for you.'" Cornelius's conversion is Spirit-initiated.
- Acts 13:2 — "The Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" The first planned Gentile mission is Spirit-directed.
- Acts 16:6–7 — "Having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia" and "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them" — the Spirit guides not only by opening doors but by closing them.

This pattern means that fulfilling the Great Commission is not a church program but Spirit-directed engagement. Missiology that reduces the Commission to human strategy and organizational effort misses the pneumatological center of Luke-Acts.

Section 9 — The Great Commission in the Pauline Letters

9.1 Romans 1:1–5 — Paul's Commission as Apostle

Romans 1:1, 5 (ESV)

"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God... through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations..."

"Obedience of faith" (ὕπακοήν πίστεως, hypakoēn pisteōs) among all nations — this is Paul's summary of the Great Commission's goal. The phrase frames Paul's entire letter and his entire missionary vocation. Whether ὑπακοήν is an objective genitive ("obedience that consists of faith") or a subjective genitive ("the obedience that flows from faith"), the point is clear: the Commission aims at transformed lives of believing obedience among every people-group.

9.2 Romans 10:13–17 — The Missional Logic

Romans 10:14–15 (ESV)

"How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'"

Romans 10:14–15 is Paul's most explicit theological grounding of the missionary enterprise. He constructs a chain:

- Calling requires belief
- Belief requires hearing
- Hearing requires preaching (κηρύσσοντος, kēryssontos — the herald)
- Preaching requires being sent (ἀποσταλῶσιν, apostalōsin — the commissioning)

The logical structure moves from the Great Commission backward: the necessity of the sent herald is the indispensable precondition of everything else. Paul's missionary compulsion in Romans 15:20 ("I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named") is the direct application of this chain.

9.3 Colossians 1:28–29 — Proclaiming and Admonishing Every Person

Colossians 1:28–29 (ESV)

"Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."

"Everyone" (πάντα ἄνθρωπον, panta anthrōpon) occurs three times in v. 28 — emphasizing the scope of the commission against any elitist or exclusive gospel. The goal is τέλειον (teleion — "mature," "complete," "perfect") — the same eschatological wholeness toward which Matthew

28's "teaching them to observe all that I commanded" points. The Great Commission aims not merely at conversion but at full Christlikeness.

9.4 2 Corinthians 5:18–20 — The Ministry of Reconciliation

2 Corinthians 5:18–20 (ESV)

"All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

"Ambassadors for Christ" (πρεσβεύομεν ὑπὲρ Χριστοῦ, presbeuomen hyper Christou) — the church functions as royal envoys of the ascended King. An ambassador does not speak his own message; he speaks the message of the one who sent him. The Great Commission is the ambassador's commission: go to all nations, speak the King's terms of peace (the gospel of reconciliation), and urge acceptance.

Section 10 — The Great Commission in Revelation: Its Eschatological Goal

Revelation 5:9 (ESV)

"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation...'"

Revelation 5:9 and 7:9 present the eschatological goal of the Great Commission: a completed church drawn from every tribe, language, people, and nation — four terms stressing comprehensive ethnic and linguistic diversity. The Great Commission will succeed because the Lamb has ransomed them by His blood. The Commission's ultimate ground is not church strategy but the definite atonement of the Lamb.

Revelation 7:9–10 (ESV)

"After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"

The vision of Revelation 7 is the Great Commission fulfilled. The Commission does not aim at Christianizing every individual or every political system; it aims at producing this eschatological community of worshippers from every corner of the earth. The church's present missionary labor is a participation in what God has already decreed and what the Lamb has already purchased.

This eschatological certainty is the theological fuel of missionary perseverance. The Commission will be completed because its goal is secured by the Lamb's blood. The question is not whether every tribe will have worshippers before the throne — it will, because Revelation declares it so — but whether the church will be faithful to carry the gospel to them.

Section 11 — Doctrinal Positions on the Great Commission

11.1 The Restrictivist View — Apostles Only

Historically argued by some within the hyper-Calvinist tradition (e.g., John Gill in his more extreme moments; some strict Particular Baptists of the 18th century), this view holds that Matthew 28:18–20 was addressed exclusively to the twelve apostles and had its fulfillment in the apostolic era (Romans 10:18 — "their voice has gone out to all the earth"). On this reading, there is no ongoing mandate for foreign missions.

This view was decisively refuted by William Carey's 1792 Enquiry. The Commission's own grammar refutes it: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" — the apostles did not live to the end of the age. The Commission explicitly transcends the apostolic generation because the promise of presence extends to it. Modern hyper-Calvinism is effectively defunct as an organized position.

11.2 The Postmillennial Mission View

Postmillennialism (Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, B.B. Warfield, A.A. Hodge, more recently Douglas Wilson and John Frame) understands the Great Commission as destined to succeed fully within history before Christ's return. On this view, the gospel will progressively win the nations — not every individual, but civilization-transforming Christian culture — as a majority of people across the world come to faith before the final parousia.

Exegetical support: Matthew 13:31–33 (the mustard seed and leaven growing until they fill the whole earth); Matthew 28:19 ("all nations"); Daniel 2:35 (the stone that fills the whole earth). The Great Commission is the mechanism by which the eschatological kingdom fills the earth before Christ's return.

11.3 The Amillennial Mission View

Amillennialism (Augustine, Calvin, Berkhof, G.K. Beale, Kim Riddlebarger) understands the current age as the millennium — the period of Christ's reign from His resurrection to His return — during which the Great Commission is being progressively fulfilled but will not result in the Christianization of civilization before the return. The parousia interrupts rather than crowns the mission.

The Great Commission is fully obligatory and genuinely advancing, but the NT's own eschatological teaching (2 Thessalonians 2; Matthew 24:12 — "because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold") tempers triumphalistic missiology. The church perseveres through opposition and partial success, not through inevitable cultural dominance.

11.4 The Premillennial Mission View

Historic premillennialism (George Eldon Ladd, D.A. Carson, Wayne Grudem) and dispensational premillennialism (Darby, Scofield, MacArthur) both affirm the Great Commission as currently binding. Dispensationalism's unique contribution: the Commission is especially urgent because the rapture and tribulation may be imminent, and the window for evangelism may close. Matthew 24:14 ("this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come") is read as a prerequisite for the return — the Commission must reach all nations before the parousia.

11.5 Reformed Missiology — The Majority Position

The dominant Reformed position (Calvin, Bavinck, Kuyper, Vos, Machen, J.H. Bavinck, Roger Nicole, Edmund Clowney) affirms:

- The Great Commission is the binding obligation of the whole church in every generation
- The mission is Christocentric: its content is the person and work of Jesus Christ, not merely ethical monotheism or social justice
- The mission is Spirit-dependent: human means (preaching, teaching, church planting) are the ordinary instruments; the Spirit is the extraordinary power
- The mission is church-centered: the disciple-making process is inherently ecclesial — baptism into the church and teaching in the church are the two instruments of v. 19
- The mission is eschatologically grounded: the church labors under the assurance that Christ's kingdom will triumph and that the Revelation 7:9 assembly will be gathered

Section 12 — The Great Commission and the Local Church

12.1 Baptism as Commission Instrument — Theological Positions

Matthew 28:19 names baptism as one of the two means of making disciples. The mode and subjects of baptism have generated significant disagreement within evangelical Christianity:

Position	Subjects	Mode	Theology	Key Scholars
Credobaptism (Baptist)	Believers only	Immersion only	Sign of regeneration already received; public profession	Carey, Spurgeon, MacArthur, Schreiner
Paedobaptism (Reformed)	Believers + covenant children	Sprinkling/pouring valid	Covenant sign; replaces circumcision; does not presuppose regeneration	Calvin, Berkhof, Sproul, Murray
Lutheran Baptism	Believers + infants	Any mode valid	Means of grace; works regeneration in infants	Luther, Pieper, Sasse
Anglican/Episcopal	Believers + covenant infants	Sprinkling/pouring	Sacramental but broadly Reformed; varied theology	Cranmer, Hooker, J.I. Packer

12.2 Teaching "All That I Have Commanded" — The Didactic Mandate

The second instrument of disciple-making is διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετείλαμην ὑμῖν — "teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Three crucial features:

- "All that I commanded" — not a selection, not the culturally comfortable parts, but the totality of Christ's authoritative teaching. This makes Bible literacy and theological education an intrinsic part of the Great Commission, not an elective supplement.
- "Teaching them to observe" — τηρεῖν (tērein) means to guard, keep, or maintain. This is not academic knowledge but obedient discipleship. The Commission aims at transformed lives, not mere intellectual agreement.
- "Them" — the disciples already made and baptized. Teaching is the ongoing, lifelong formation process. The Commission does not end at conversion; it continues through sanctification.

12.3 The Commission and Church Planting

The logic of Matthew 28:19 requires church planting as the primary vehicle of mission. Disciple-making in NT terms is always ecclesial: the baptized become members of the visible covenant community; the taught are formed in the community of believers. The apostolic mission in Acts

always results in planted churches (Acts 14:23: "when they had appointed elders for them in every church"). Parachurch mission disconnected from church planting is missiologically deficient by the Commission's own terms.

12.4 The Priority of Unreached Peoples

Modern missiology since Donald McGavran (*The Bridges of God*, 1955) and Ralph Winter's 1974 Lausanne address has emphasized the distinction between *panta ta ethnē* (all people-groups) and "all persons." Winter argued that until the gospel has a self-propagating church in every ethnolinguistic group, the Commission's geographic scope remains unfulfilled — regardless of how many individuals in reached contexts are evangelized. The Joshua Project and similar organizations track the approximately 7,000+ remaining "unreached peoples" (those with less than 2% evangelical Christian population and no indigenous church capable of evangelizing its own members).

✦ Theological Note

The Reformed tradition affirms the importance of frontier missiology (reaching the unreached) while also insisting on the ongoing discipleship mandate in reached contexts. The Commission does not permit the church to abandon depth (teaching to observe all things) for breadth (rapid church planting) or vice versa. Both are non-negotiable Commission elements.

Section 13 — Master Cross-Reference Table

The following table traces the primary elements of the Great Commission across all five commission texts:

Element	Matthew 28:18–20	Mark 16:15–16	Luke 24:44–49	John 20:21–23	Acts 1:4–8
Authority/Basis	All authority given (Dan. 7:13–14)	—	Fulfillment of all Scripture	Father's sending of Son	Father's promise
Main Command	Make disciples	Proclaim the gospel	Be witnesses	Be sent as Father sent Son	Be witnesses
Scope	All nations	All creation	All nations, from Jerusalem	Forgive/retain sins	Jerusalem → end of earth
Baptism	Trinitarian name	Belief + baptism = salvation	—	—	—
Teaching	Observe all commanded	—	Repentance for forgiveness	—	—
Spirit Promise	Implicit (presence)	—	Clothed with power	Breathed on them	Power when Spirit comes
Presence/Assurance	I am with you always	—	—	Peace be with you	—
OT Background	Dan. 7; Ps. 2; Gen. 12	Jonah; Isa. 49	Isa. 52–53; Ps. 16	Gen. 2:7; John 1	Isa. 43; Joel 2

Section 14 — Summary and Application

The Great Commission is not a peripheral addendum to Christian theology — it is the church's identity. The risen Christ, now enthroned with all authority, sends His Spirit-equipped people to every corner of the earth with the gospel of His person and work, gathering a redeemed humanity for the eschatological assembly around the throne. This mission:

- Is Trinitarian — issued by the Son, empowered by the Spirit, in fulfillment of the Father's eternal purpose
- Is Christocentric — its content is the suffering, risen, and reigning Lord Jesus Christ
- Is ecclesial — accomplished through the gathered local church: Word, baptism, teaching, and discipline
- Is eschatological — it will be completed; Revelation 7:9 is certain; the church labors in hope, not doubt
- Is costly — the word μάρτυς carries the weight of suffering; faithful witness may require everything
- Is comprehensive — not a specialized calling for missionaries but the vocation of the entire church

The church's faithfulness to the Great Commission is not ultimately measured by statistics or growth metrics but by its fidelity to Christ's actual commands: baptizing in the trinitarian Name and teaching everything He commanded. The promise that undergirds all of it remains: "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The One who has all authority walks with His people through every age and every nation until the last disciple has been gathered and the age comes to its appointed close.

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