
Theology of Missions 2

Dr. Robert E. Coleman

*A lecture delivered during the 2nd Donald Owens' School of World Missions Lecture Series
January 11, 2005 - 10:30 a.m.*

We were addressing the theology of the Great Commission last night, and I was pointing out this is not an appendage to our faith or an added specialty, but it is the heartbeat of all theology. It is the only reason we even have Christian theology, the reason we have a Bible; God wants us to know Him and to love Him. He is a missionary God. He knows the condition of the world and the condition of the people that He made in His image so that we would have the ability to know who He is and experience His love. He made us so that truly we could enter into fellowship with Him and enjoy communion with Him forever.

In the tragedy of sin, that fellowship was broken, and yet God's love never left us. He addressed the need for a reconciliation all through the Bible. That missionary heart of God is seeking those who have turned from Him. It came to its fruition nearly 2000 years ago, when as the prophets said, "the son of God Himself, the Visible Word" – came and clothed Himself with our flesh to bear our sorrows and our griefs and finally to accept our judgment on the cross. On the third day He rose from the dead, confirming His disciples and assuring them He would never leave them as He sent them out to make known to the world His purpose of redemption. Indeed that is what we are doing when we go forth as missionaries. We are simply reflecting the God who made us and who has redeemed us and has now brought together a church that reflects the beauty of His holiness. We minister together in that confidence, that someday there is going to be a reunion with Him when our faith will turn to sight and we will behold him in all His glory.

That indeed is the heartbeat of our faith. We are not a missionary because of some particular special call. We are missionaries because we are Christians. I think of a circuit rider who was asked one day if he was a

missionary and he said, “Well, I am a Methodist. We are all missionaries.” I wish that was true today among all Methodists. As you know not many years ago Nazarenes came and stole our fire and left us nothing but the stove. But we all came out from the same stock and as Wesley said, “The whole world is our parish.” We do not make any distinction between home and foreign missions. It is just one great big world that God loves and for whom He has come in His Son to save. The whole revelation in His Word is to make known to us this great missionary compassion of God . This is the heartbeat of our faith.

But I want us to move on to see what that means. What are we going to do about it since “doing follows being?” It is here where our faith takes practical expression everyday. This is brought out in those final words of Jesus in all the Gospels before He ascended back into heaven. He told His followers, “Now you go and you do what I have been doing: you preach, you witness, you disciple, you teach, because I am sending you into the world just as I was sent. And as you go, you make disciples of all nations.” That commission is given particular prominence in the last chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, where the command is recorded in verses 18 to 20 of chapter 28.

See how the command comes into focus in context. It’s always good to understand the Scripture in the context in which it was written. I think of an old farmer who was contesting the decision of the insurance company when he filed the claim for compensation after an accident. He was denied his compensation on the basis that on the time of the accident, he told the police officer, “There is nothing wrong with me.” So they had to go to court and have a hearing. The judge looked at this farmer and asked, “Is it true that at the time of the accident you told the police officer that ‘there was nothing wrong with me?’”

“Well sir,” the farmer said, “it was like this. I was going down the road in my pick-up and Betsy my cow was in the back.”

“Your honor,” interrupted the lawyer for the insurance company, “the man is not answering your question.”

The judge looked at the farmer and said, “You will have to answer sir.” “Well it was like this,” he answered. I was going down the highway in my pick-up and my cow Betsy was in the back.”

“Your honor,” again interrupted the counsel for the insurance company, “The man is still not answering your question.”

So the judge looked at the farmer and then at the lawyer, and said, “Well, why don’t we let the man tell his story.”

“Well sir it was like this. I was going down the highway in my pick-up, and Betsy my cow was in the back, when this big semi pulled out in front and I crashed on the side of that truck. I went flying this way and Betsy went flying that way. And when I came to, this police officer was standing beside me. And he looked over at Betsy and I heard him say, ‘This old cow is in bad shape.’ And your honor he pulled out his gun, and shot her dead. Then he turned to me and said, ‘Now how do you feel?’”

The context helps us understand. And it is interesting as you look at the setting in which the Great Commission is given. Note verse 16, these disciples had gathered there on the mount where Jesus told them to go. When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him. Now that is easy to understand, because Jesus appeared to these disciples in the glory of His resurrection body. You can understand how the disciples felt when they saw Him, they worshiped him. But then notice what else is said. There were some who doubted. That is intriguing. Why would those disciples doubt in this situation? They certainly could not question the resurrection. Jesus was standing before them in His glorified body and He would soon be ascending back to heaven where He would take His place at the right hand of the Majesty on high. Why would they doubt? Well, I imagine that it must be in their own sense of anxiety and fear regarding the future, for they are going out soon into a hostile world, the world which crucified their Lord. I expect that there was a good deal of apprehension, and they were wondering how they were going to survive. That is the context of this Great Commission. Note vs. 18—“Jesus came to them.” Is not that beautiful? He knows our doubts, He knows our fears, He knows what is

going on through our mind when we look at the future and see all the uncertainties that await us. He knows you. He knows what is going through your mind as you think of the task before you. Is it not beautiful how He comes to us and says, “All power and all authority is given to me in heaven and on earth”?

Dr. Donald McGavran, the father of the modern school of Church Growth, was asked shortly before he died. “What was for you the most neglected aspect of the Great Commission?” You would have thought, knowing Dr. McGavran, that he would mention people groups or homogeneous principles or some of the things that he is famous for. But that was not what was in mind at all. Without hesitation, he said, “It’s the way the Great Commission begins. It’s the affirmation that Jesus makes of His authority, and of His power.” Indeed if we would turn that confession of Christ around that testimony of Jesus, it would become the creed of the Christian church. Are you aware of that? A creed that will be affirmed by any Christian anywhere in the world. If they truly believe Christ, they would affirm Jesus is Lord! As we note that confession in the 10th chapter of Romans verse 9, this is the essence—that Jesus is the incarnate God. He is the One who flung out the stars in the heavens, who laid the foundations of the earth, the One who reigns in majesty on the throne, the One who is the sovereign king of the universe; the Lord God Almighty. He is the One who stands before us, and says, “I have all power in heaven and in earth.” Is not that assuring? We can be confident the One who speaks to us will be able to fulfill His word.

That being true, notice what follows—“therefore.” And when you see “therefore” in the Bible, note what it is there for. “Therefore,” He said “go 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 obey all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age.”

I want us to focus especially upon that command of Jesus. Note the four action words in verses 19 and 20: “go,” “make disciples,” “baptizing,” and “teaching.” What is most fascinating is that of these four action words,

only one is a verb in the original Greek. Have you noticed that you Greek scholars? And what is the verb that gives direction to everything else? It is “make disciples.” “Go,” “baptize,” and “teach” are participles. Participles are not intended to stand alone. They get their direction—their force—from the leading verb. Now you may not always observe this basic rule of grammar, and incidentally that is why you have those red marks on those term papers. Look for the verb. The verb controls the participle. And when this is recognized in the Great Commission, it gives direction to what we are to be doing. Yes we are to go, and baptize, and teach, and in the other versions, we witness, preach, and are sent (Mark 16:15; John 17:17; Acts 1:8). And yet what is the objective, the purpose of it all? What are we trying to do? Not make converts. Certainly we need to be converts before we can enter the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus said. That means you repent and by faith you turn to Him and receive the gift of salvation. That is the beginning, but certainly that is not the end. He said “make disciples.” And how does this word translate? You scholars know its meaning. It translates “a student,” or “pupil” or “follower,” as in the sense of an apprentice. This becomes the key to God’s plan for reaching the world. It tells us very clearly what we are to be doing—why we are on this earth. For if you make disciples—persons who will continue to follow Christ and learn of Him, they will grow in His character, in His likeness, in His holiness. And they will also begin to see how He is ministering to the world, and they too will begin to follow in that tradition, in that pattern. They will begin to do what He was doing in making disciples. As they have learned, they will teach others to do the same. So that through the process of multiplication, someday, the whole world will have opportunity to hear the gospel. That is His plan. It is so simple. And it begins in His command to the church—the way every believer can live in fulfillment of the Great Commission—everyday.

We have already learned that we are missionaries. This is the heart of the message that saves us. But now we see how it takes practical expression in our lifestyle as we do what He commands. Being a disciple of Christ, we learn from Him the interpretation of what this commission means. As

we look at Him, we can see some principles which underlie His activity, then translate those principles into our culture and situation where we live. Methods and programs, of course, will change according to different circumstances and time, but principles will be constant in any culture and in any age. That is what we want to think about very briefly.

And we will begin where we first met Him—in the incarnation when He becomes a servant. We do not really get to know Jesus until He takes a physical form, as the Son of God, as the Word of God now made flesh. And in this identity with us, He becomes like us as He lives in this world, bearing our burdens and shows us how we too can become a servant. We are told that Jesus, who had all power, renounced His own rights, He humbled Himself and took the form of a servant. You see, in order to serve the world, you must renounce the value system of this world. The world teaches us to do our own thing, irregardless of how it may affect others. So you push your way ahead. We live in a society where that is the value system. But Jesus shows us that to be relevant, we must recognize our own rights and take up a cross.

This becomes evident from the very beginning of His life, as He was raised in obscurity and probably having to take care of His mother and younger brothers and sisters after His earthly father (Joseph) died. It finds practical expression later in ministry, in feeding the hungry, healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, delivering those who are demon-possessed and constantly preaching the gospel of the kingdom and teaching the Word of God.

No wonder people are attracted to Him. Sometimes they would gather by the thousands. Once Jesus looked out to this crowd and characterized the people as sheep that had lost their way. The tragedy was they did not have anyone like a shepherd who could lead them—someone who could love them—who knows the way of God. He told his disciples, seeing the need, to pray for the lord of the harvest to send forth workers into this harvest—workers who have the characteristics of a shepherd, who would lead the sheep in His service.

If you multiply that kind of people, someday you will reach the world. That is something all of us can do, that is where we begin. When you are known as a servant, you will never lack opportunity to have some disciples. Have you discovered that? Don't you like to be with people who demonstrate they care; they minister at the place you hurt—where you have need?

But as Jesus went about doing good, sometimes because He was so effective in demonstrating His compassion, the crowds overwhelmed Him. He could not possibly be with all the people that needed help. So in the midst of this busy ministry, He began to call out some in a special way to be with him—disciples, learners. When the number became overbearing, He chose twelve especially to be with Him. Within this small group three have a closer relationship—Peter, James, and John, only a few. Indeed this small nucleus of people is finally narrowed down into three—Peter, James, and John. It is not that He loves the world any less, but it is for the sake of the world that He concentrates upon a few.

The disciples become the focus of His ministry—people much like Himself. None of them seem to be great intellectuals; they were just simple people—fishermen, businessmen, one was a tax collector. Even more interesting, none of them, like Jesus, was a member of the Levitical priesthood. While they have many limitations, they did have a desire to learn.

That is what you look for, and when you look around, you will see some people like that where you live—in your family, in your neighborhood, people you work beside. This is no accident—they are the answers to your prayers. Do you see them?

Notice then how Jesus spends so much of His time with them. They stayed together. Seldom do you see Jesus do anything by Himself. They are always standing around looking on. They walked the tracks together, they go to the synagogue and the temple together, and they for the most part, have their ministry together. Here is a principle that we dare not overlook. If we want to develop the potential of people, we have to be with them. You cannot be with everybody, but you can with a few, and especially

those that are closest to you. You must be careful that they are men and women who really have the desire to learn.

Notice in His ministry how He opened His life to them, how He let them see the inner working of His mind. They beheld Him as He prayed, and it was not long before they wanted to pray like Jesus. They watched Him use the Scripture and interpret it so that it was fulfilled in the way He lived everyday. They saw His compassion with people. They were learning all the time by being with Him.

What facilitated this ongoing education was the fact that He was teaching them to obey. In fact that is actually included here in the commission. Did you note this in verse 19? This is one of the participles. For, as we are making disciples, those who are learning with us need to recognize that if they are going to move on, they need to practice what they are learning—to obey.

Those first disciples of Jesus were slow learners. There were so many things they did not understand. Even the theology of the atonement was not clear to them until after the resurrection. We have to be patient with the people God brings into our life. Usually they are very slow learners, not to say that we know it all, but we can learn together. That is why I want some of you to be down here so we can talk after this meeting. That is the way we learn. That is the way we grow in grace and knowledge and that is the way faith finds practical expression everyday. Faith is not just an intellectual accent to a creed. It is lifestyle. It is the way you live out the Great Commission.

In this context, you can see how Jesus is constantly giving them more to see, He is giving them more example to follow, teaching them by what they observe. This is the way they, too, can teach others. All the while, those disciples are learning what it means to fulfill the Great Commission. So when at last, before He returns to heaven, and tells them to make disciples, they understand what it means. Do you see why? They have been discipled. They had seen the Great Commission lived out before their eyes. Do the people that are close to you see that lived out in your home? in your church? That is the way we always learn most quickly. Let it be seen in your life.

They watched and learned, and as they moved on, they were constantly seeing how they could have a part. First, it is not much more than just to attend; gradually He finds ways they can help out in hospitality. He is preaching, but the disciples, we read, are doing the baptizing. That is interesting to me they are not even ordained yet. Though they did not have enough faith to feed five thousand, they did have enough faith to take a basket after Jesus broke the fish and the bread and gave them those provisions, and told them to go out and feed the people. Is not that beautiful? There are two miracles there. It is not just the breaking of the bread and multiplying of the loaves; there was a miracle in the hearts of those disciples. They took courage and they went out and did what Jesus asked them.

After about a year and a half, maybe two years, he said one day, “Now we are going to divide up.” They were probably scared, but He said, “When you go out to villages, you won’t be alone. You will be working with another person, and you just do what you have seen me do—you heal the sick, cast out demons, preach the gospel of the kingdom. When you come into a new village, you find the most worthy family, that is someone who has enough interest in your mission, who will open their home and provide hospitality. Make that your headquarters. You can evangelize the whole community during the day but come back to this same house. That will be where you begin to build relationship and trust. When you come back at night and kick off your sandals, just sit around the table, and laugh and sing and reflect upon the experiences of that day.” This could be the beginning of a new church plant. Now if you have covered the whole community and it appears that no one has at least an interest... Remember what Jesus told them to do? This has always intrigued me. “Shake the dust off your feet, go to the next village.” We do not have the luxury of going through programs when no one is seeking to learn.

But once you get involved in the ministry, you will always be encountering difficulties. If you have not been encountering some difficulties, the probability is that you are not doing enough to make the devil want to defeat you. If you are truly working, you can expect some opposition

because the devil knows what is going on. He is always going to attack the captain—the one in front. But you do not have to be overwhelmed. Remember the one who sends you has all power in heaven and earth.

Jesus called His disciples back, and asked how things were going. They told Him and He used their experiences everyday as a beginning point for further teaching—on-the-job training . He was not just speaking theoretically about doctrines. He was talking about faith that had been expressed that day—what they have needed to exercise in terms of their own ministry. That is the way to teach—out of experience. In this constant supervision of the disciples—ever leading them on through it all, He was constantly praying for them.

The 17th chapter of John is the greatest insight to the Great Commission in this recorded prayer of Jesus. If you want to know what is uppermost in a person's heart, learn how they pray. You can see in this prayer how He praised God. The worship of the Father is what fills His soul with joy even though He knows it means the cross. But He turns His attention to the gifts of the Father that have been given Him out of the world—the disciples, and particularly the eleven. How He pours out His soul for these who followed Him so closely to the end. He prays that they might have His joy, that they might be delivered from the evil one, that they might be sanctified just as He commits Himself to the mission. Then, with an amazing display of faith and confidence in His disciples, Jesus envisions how through their ministry of multiplication, someday the world will come to believe on Him whom the Father has sent.

The Great Commission focused the strategy by which this objective would be realized by the disciples of Jesus reproducing what they had learned by making disciples. He projected this vision of the coming harvest all through His ministry, stretching their faith, teaching them to think big, not to limit the resources of Almighty God.

One day they were walking along, when Jesus noticed a vine growing out of the bushes and He compared Himself as the true vine. He said, "You are like the branches growing off the vine." Then He added, "From those branches there would be fruit." What a powerful illustration! You

see the branch gets its life from the vine, but those branches, those disciples are going to bring forth the harvest. Just as we see with a shepherd, he is not the one who primarily reproduces. The sheep reproduces; the shepherd is in charge of the sheep to care for them so that they can come into maturity—and they begin to reproduce.

That is how you measure your ministry—the way reproduction is going on in the next generation; how leadership is being raised up for people with your vision to go forth and hopefully do a better job than what you have done. They may not be a better preacher, they may not be a better teacher, but they may indeed be a better discipler. That is the command. It is not by some gift of the Spirit. It is not some specialized training you learn in theological seminary. The Great Commission is a lifestyle. It is the way you live every single day. It is the way a missionary can fulfill the Great Commission wherever God leads them.

And this is what you must teach your people. This is what makes the church dynamic as it reaches out. You are not limited to clergy. You are not limited to those who have the special privilege of education, because now you see that the priesthood includes all believers. You see the body of Christ Himself going forth into the world. He did not have a university degree. He did not have the ordination robes of a priest. He was just a disciple maker who finally took the burden of the world in His heart and bore us all to the cross. That is the example to follow.

Is this your lifestyle? It is the way the Great Commission finds expression in the life of the church of Jesus Christ everyday. Teach this to your people and let this be what they see when they watch you. Do not worry about the adversary and the hostility of the world and all the attacks of Satan, because Jesus will be with you. The Great Commission concludes with this promise: “I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.” Yes, He knows some of you doubt. He knows some of you are fearful. He knows you are facing some hard times. But know that you go forth in the presence of Jesus whom the Spirit now exalts and makes real to us. This is the reality that comes so powerfully into focus in the time of the Pentecost, which we will consider in the closing lecture tomorrow.