
THE GREAT COMMISSION FOR THE 21st CENTURY

Robert Charles Donahue

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It is just possible that more people are alive in our world today than have lived in all of human history! Almost half of the world's more than six billion people live in Asia-Pacific. Almost 40% of these three billion people are under fifteen years of age. The fields truly are "white unto harvest," as Jesus said. Multitudes are open to receive the Christ of the gospel message. What a tremendous responsibility and opportunity the followers of Jesus have today to make disciples of the nations!

The Great Commission will be the same in the 21st century as it was in the 20th century and each century since Christ gave it to His disciples. The command is still the same: "make disciples" of all nations. However, the way this great commission is understood and implemented by the church may well be different in the 21st century.

The 20th century was dominated by the business, political, and military paradigms of the West. Europe and the United States largely led in this domination. It has been said that the business of America is business! The business of America was run by top-down global corporations utilizing the managerial paradigm of control. This managerial approach came with strategies that included goals, objectives and measurable outcomes. The missions of the Western churches were largely operated with this paradigm in mind.

The great theologian of the early church, Augustine of Hippo, made the point that "all truth is God's truth." This has often been used in

modern times in church circles to explain the use of various methodologies and paradigms, such as the business model just mentioned for doing missions. It may well be that all truth is God's truth, but that we do not necessarily understand that truth nor apply it correctly. It may be that borrowing from a paradigm in one sphere to apply in another sphere does not necessarily equate truth. Perhaps the truth as it applies to the practice of missions is that there is a Scriptural paradigm already given which is the truth of God for us in this matter. It is possible we have been slow to recognize that our perception of biblical truth has been heavily influenced by the overwhelming global cultural paradigms of our times.

Some have suggested, and I have been among them, that perhaps "partnership" is a better way to understand the doing of missions rather than the top-down, managerial, sometimes imperialistic, often paternalistic and economic control models often prevalent in mission circles in the 20th century. Partnership implies a semblance of equality and a sense of cooperation and working together. However, the short-coming of "partnership" is that it, too, is a term from the corporate business paradigm! It seems to me, that there is something more suggested by the biblical text than a business arrangement for doing the Great Commission.

I would like to suggest some key directional ideas for the fulfilling of the Great Commission in the 21st century. These may be departures from the status quo, and may, therefore, cause some discomfort and even pain within our current institutional operations in doing missions. These ideas will challenge us to let Scripture itself speak to us missiologically, and will hopefully provoke us to re-think the doing of the great missionary task in new paradigms driven by biblical and theological concerns.

1. **"Incarnation" could be the word that describes our doing of missions in the 21st century.** "Partnership" is too limited. The great New Testament passages bear witness to body language—the Body of Christ: Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12. The doing of missions needs to be understood as the Body of believers in

Christ, and Christ indwelling, filling and empowering believers to make Him known. Both individually and corporately we are in Christ—the Christ who has assumed union with humanity as the God-Man, so as to bring redemption and reconciliation.

2. The motivation for fulfilling the Great Commission must be to glorify and worship God. It is for us to participate fully in the reconciliation ministry that He has entrusted to all His followers. It decidedly is not to be driven by such things as compassion for the poor and needy, by concern only for the lost, or simply by a desire to better the world or even to help our fellow human beings. Our motivation must not be anthropocentric, but it must be theocentric and specifically, Christocentric.

3. The doing of missions must be grounded theologically in the biblical understanding of the triune Godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our missiology must be deeply God-centered. The Great Commission is as big as the creation of the world by God the Father by His Son through the dynamic of the Spirit. It is grounded in the love of the Father for the whole world, in the sacrifice of the Son for the sins of the world, and in the convicting and convincing work of the Holy Spirit of the world of sin, righteousness, and judgement.

4. The global church must become a truly missionary church in which all its members participate in the fulfilling of the Great Commission everywhere. The Great Commission is not necessarily a call to foreign missionary activity. It is a command to make disciples of the nations. We are to do this wherever we happen to be. We will come to appreciate more fully the fact that the doing of missions is not limited by geography. We need the insights from every part of the global church in developing and implementing our missiology.

For too long the work of evangelism and missions has been the practical domain of the professional. While some are given special gifts within the Body of Christ, the broad work of evangelism and missions is the heart and soul of the life Christ desires for all believers wherever they may live. A conversion strategy which recognizes the primary responsibility to inculcate new believers with the commands of Christ to

obey Him in all things—including making disciples—will be seen as essential. Such a grass-roots understanding and participation is already seen in many places around the world with spectacular results.

5. We will hopefully move toward a more biblical understanding of the Christian mission, which is centered heavily in an understanding of the cross, of the suffering of the godly, and of death with Christ, so that we may share in His resurrection. This will mean a lessening of our dependence upon outcome based strategies or the goals and objectives methods of doing missions. We will need to examine and apply more closely the teachings of Scripture in regard to poverty, to suffering, and to martyrdom. We will need to take much more seriously the call of Scripture to commitment, to integrity, to self-denial, and to holiness. These words can no longer be simply shibboleths—they must become the realities which we live as believers. Holiness of life and lifestyle is a crying need in the church today. We ought not to continue to organize our missiological efforts according to marketing principles, which only leads to an unbiblical understanding of gospel and Christian mission. We must have an understanding which has room for the mystery of God in Christ, for suffering and persecution, for poverty and death.

6. One of the challenges for the evangelical movement in developed nations will be the challenge of relinquishing control of the modern missionary enterprise. The giving up of control, power, privileges and advantages will not be an easy task. Those who control the enterprise do so from an economic base. The new paradigm of the 21st century will call for giving up of rights and privileges, and will call for finding creative and godly ways of surrendering accumulated wealth to the service of Christ's kingdom without controls attached. The experiences of the early church, of Barnabas specifically, may be the beginning of understanding the biblical mandate for us in this area. The incarnational approach to mission will hardly fit well within the framework of many of our contemporary institutional structures, strategies and organizations. Self-denial and the cross do not lend themselves easily to managerial missions strategies.

7. The global church will need to come to grips with a more biblical missiology which reflects the great cultural diversity of the people of God throughout the world. Twentieth century missions were driven by the West. Twenty-first century missions must be driven by the whole church—the whole church participating in the Great Commission of giving the whole gospel to the whole world. In practical terms this will mean not only new faces but new perspectives. For this to happen successfully, the church as a whole must take seriously the call of Christ to do reconciliation—especially reconciliation among the members of the Body of Christ. We have too often in the past ignored this or been ambivalent about it. But the reconciliation must be so thorough that not only is equality achieved, but actual servanthood and humility. It must come to the point that we are all engaged in building up one another in the Lord, encouraging, and preferring one another. We must intentionally engage in the work of empowering God’s people to “do the work of ministry.” This necessitates the next item.

8. Holiness which changes the worldview and lifestyles of believers is absolutely essential if the church of the 21st century is to successfully obey Christ in fulfilling the Great Commission to this generation. The need of the hour is for personal and social transformation in terms of God’s holiness. The church is called to be a holy nation; we are called to be holy people “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.” For too long holiness has been only an honored word even within the holiness movement. The need for teaching biblical holiness and living biblical holiness has never been greater. There is not just a need to teach and preach holiness doctrine—something we should be doing clearly and without apology—but there is a need to live the life of holiness so that it affects our social environment and effects change both in us and in others. Our missiology must be driven by a biblically and theologically sound holiness dynamic. John Wesley’s view that “there is no holiness except social holiness” must be taken seriously and applied in the world of the 21st century. This is the charter of the Church of the Nazarene—it is a call to holiness as we identify with the despised Nazarene who touches the lives of the poor

toiling masses of the world. May the Lord Jesus call us back to our holiness roots as biblical Christians, and as Nazarenes.

9. **The missiology of the 21st century will be characterized by a grass-roots, bottom-up approach.** It will often seem messy and uncontrolled, but it will be under the control of the Holy Spirit who is the God-dynamic who makes this Great Commission come alive. No more should we rely upon a few at the top of an organizational chart to plan and determine the work of missions. That dynamic should arise from the dynamic of the Holy Spirit working through His people all over the world in a holy concert moved primarily by prayer. It is essentially a return to the New Testament paradigm—a return long overdue. The power of this kind of movement of God can hardly be imagined. What a privilege to be alive and participate in what the Spirit is doing!

10. **A new appreciation of the doctrine of the church will emerge in the 21st century.** Missiology will be seen as the work of the whole global church. Therefore, participation from the local level will increase significantly. Even theological and missions training will become more and more in concert with the local church and grass-roots of the worldwide church. As Bishop B. F. Westcott once observed, the great danger of today is that we will allow the ministerial offices to supercede the general power bestowed upon the whole church. That power can be awesome. It is a power from the Holy Spirit particularly designed for the fulfilling of the command of Christ to make disciples. The fulfilling of the Great Commission is not for a select few but is the commission of the entire church! God in Christ has given His Holy Spirit to His church to fulfill His commission.

11. **Strategies which appreciate the urban aspects of the Pauline approach will be key to reaching the great cities of the world—especially the super-cities of 21st century Asia.** The key elements are in the New Testament text for our instruction. Key locations for exposure of the gospel message, the transformation of a core of disciples, the commitment of resources to evangelism and discipleship, the careful nurture and encouragement of leadership—these are all part of the “new” strategies. The ideas of John Nevius are

applicable in the challenging urban settings if truly sustainable and indigenous churches are to be founded: self-government, self-propagation, self-support. Above all, the spiritual dynamic evident in the textual record is of ultimate importance. The communion with and obedience to the call of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential. The strategies for the future must be found within the framework of the dynamic of the Spirit at work in His people, calling them to obedience to Christ, not in the latest fad or gimmick.

12. We are called to a renewal of emphasis upon the Bible and prayer. For the 21st century let us heed a call to a serious consideration of the Bible as containing everything necessary for our Christian life and ministry. Let us be known as people of the One Book! May we saturate our lives in the Word of God. May we come to a strong appreciation of the Scriptures, that indeed, *All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.* The good work of evangelizing, discipling—doing the work of the Great Commission—must be thoroughly grounded in and informed by the Scriptures. Our tendencies in the late 20th century seem to have been to search for answers in the social sciences for the work of God. The need of the new century is to find those answers in the Word of God.

Along with this emphasis upon the Bible is an accompanying emphasis upon prayer. Every great work of God has been in conjunction with great praying. This should not be surprising in that this is the very method Jesus taught us and commanded us to use in order to connect with God and to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. Education, training, and planning may all have their places, but prayer is essential. And it is too often the one great essential in the work of God which is either left out or minimized. Our human tendency is too often to make our plans then pause for a few moments to invoke God's blessing upon what we have in mind to do. Rather, let us put a primary emphasis upon seeking God, His direction, and His power, in prayer! Jesus Himself set us the example of praying so that we, like Him, might do the work of the Father. The apostles were moved by the great power of God as they prayed fervently together. The apostle Paul was guided

by the Holy Spirit Himself in specific directions of missionary activity in the midst of prayer.

Jesus is calling men and women to obey Him and follow Him selflessly in a holy life of the Word and prayer. He is still calling disciples to “tarry for power from on High.” His Spirit is even now being outpoured upon old and young, upon men and women who are going forth in the purity and power of the Spirit to proclaim Jesus Christ. Will you obey the Lord and give your life without reservations to Him today? Will you be one of His laborers to enter the great harvest field in this 21st century to work for God until Jesus comes?