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THE GREAT COMMISSION

IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION*

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Since 1792, when Baptist shoemaker William Carey wrote his *Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*, “The Great Commission” has defined what it means to be a Protestant in the broadly evangelical tradition. In his Enquiry, Carey argued that Christ’s command in Matthew 28:19-20 was not something confined to the time of the Disciples, but was a present responsibility for all his followers. “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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Within thirty years of Carey’s position paper, denominations and groups of like minded believers in the United Kingdom, Continental Europe, and the United States had founded missionary societies. Although the nineteenth century was designated the “Great Century” of foreign missions by historian K.S. Latourette, the twentieth century saw the greatest geographic expansion of Christianity since the conversion of Europe. At the end of the second millennium since the birth of Jesus, the Gospel has spread into every part of the globe, and into most of the world’s major cultural groupings.

But what is the meaning and future of the Great Commission in the twenty-first century? Not since the days of William Carey has there been so much dissension among Christians over its meaning. While the Great

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Commission resonates within the hearts of Protestants, as a mark of evangelical identity and faithfulness to the will of God, the context in which it operates has changed drastically over the past few decades. Just as William Carey's context lent itself to the rediscovery of the Great Commission, so today's context is raising questions about its interpretation for Christian mission.

In this essay, I wish to reflect on the meaning of the Great Commission in an age of globalization. While the Gospel of Jesus Christ is timeless, the contexts in which mission takes place are always changing. As Orlando Costas often emphasized in his many publications and lectures, we must exegete both the biblical texts and the contexts for Christian mission in the 21st century. Christian mission, or witness to the Gospel across diverse boundaries, is a process of relating the Christian faith to the ever-changing realities in the world created by God and yearning toward re-creation. Those committed to mission must reflect on it with the Bible in one hand, and the newspaper in the other, to paraphrase Karl Barth. As E Stanley Jones said, when confronted with the inexorable forces of Indian nationalism, "Evangelize the inevitable." In other words, look around the world, see what is going on, and then figure out how the Gospel is relevant to that inevitable situation and context.

Is the Great Commission Finished?

The spread of Christianity into nearly every culture in the world by the late twentieth century has raised the issue for many whether the Great Commission should or can retain its centrality for Christian world mission. Has the command "Go into all the world" finally been fulfilled on the part of Jesus' followers? Mission leaders from both conservative and liberal perspectives, as well as religious pluralists, are questioning whether the Great Commission is finished. Many evangelical denominations and para-church agencies worked together during the late twentieth century to reach all the so-called "unreached peoples" with the Gospel message. Called the A.D. 2000 movement, this united push concentrated on fulfilling the Great Commission. Central to its energy was a definition of the missionary task that revolved around planting the church in every group of people by the year 2000. Defining the "nations" as ethnic groups of people rather than political entities, in 1974 at the Lausanne Conference on World Evangelization, Dr. Ralph Winter proved with statistics that several billion of the world's people could only be reached by cross-cultural missionaries. Rather than representing the end of the days of cross-cultural mission, as many mainline

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churches were arguing during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the work of reaching the mosaic of ethnic groups had just begun. Winter launched what became a massive popular movement to reach this mosaic of peoples. The Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Wycliffe Bible Translators, Youth with a Mission, the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, and virtually every large North American para-church missionary agency united to compile databases, conduct educational programs in local churches, and distribute the unreached peoples among mission agencies and evangelical congregations. Their goal was to establish by the year 2000 a church-planting movement within every group of unreached peoples in the world. A series of major conferences emphasized that evangelicals worldwide were committing themselves to the task of finishing the Great Commission in their lifetimes.

Some of the leaders of the Lausanne Movement and the A.D. 2000 initiative have questioned whether the Great Commission is, in fact, on the verge of being completed by the successful planting of vital, evangelistic churches among every people group. The A.D. 2000 movement closed its doors on March 31, 2001. According to Luis Bush, head of the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement, by the end of 2000, eight out of every ten people had “access to the entire Bible in their own language.”¹ Ninety-five percent of the world’s population had access to some Scriptures, but also to Christian radio broadcasts and recordings, and to the Jesus Film. By the end of the year 2000, an estimated eighty percent of the world had heard the Gospel.² In Bush’s mind, the very success of Christian mission led to questions about the interpretation of the Great Commission in the 21st century. Ralph Winter, founder of the unreached peoples movement, noted that there are few “traditional mission fields” left.³

No less a person than Billy Graham, who has devoted his time and resources to world evangelization for many decades, has suggested that the Great Commission is being fulfilled.⁴ On December 8, 2001, during a televised Billy Graham Crusade in Fresno, California, Graham related his message to current events, as he often does, in this case to the worldwide growth of terrorism. He interpreted the events of 9/11 as signs for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. One of his main reasons for heralding the imminent return of Christ is that, for the first time in human history, the Gospel is being proclaimed worldwide in accordance with Matt 24:14, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come.” In Graham’s millennial vision, international terrorism and the global spread of Christianity are working together as signs of the end of the age.

On the other side of the theological spectrum, a number of missiologists are concluding that the Great Commission should no longer be emphasized as the center of Christian mission because the age of expansion is over. A subtext of this position is that Christian expansion is an embarrassing remnant of colonial history. Robert Schreiter, one of the greatest North American Catholic missiologists today, argues that the paradigm of mission for the 21st century should be reconciliation.⁵ He is joined by other voices who argue, perhaps in reaction to narrow readings of the Great Commission, that expansion carries with it a connotation of Christian superiority and a history of western coercion. Schreiter cites Second Corinthians 5: 18-19, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." Reconciliation as the 21st century model for mission means the reconciliation of God with humanity through Jesus Christ, of human beings with each other in situations of violence, and of humanity with the cosmos. In this view, the Great Commission is finished not because the task of world evangelization has been completed, but because it proves inadequate in a culturally and theologically pluralistic world.

The "new age" spirituality that appeals to our post-Christian western culture provides a third set of arguments for the irrelevance of the Great Commission. Where Billy Graham sees the globalization of both terrorism and of Christianity as signs of the end times, the professional futurist Gerald Celente, author of *Trends 2000*, believes that the quest for spirituality caused by the shock of the events of 9/11 will give rise to what he calls "New Millennium religion." The post 9/11 context reveals that the conditions are right for a "serious attempt to redefine spirituality, for the rise of a worldwide religion that will unite, rather than divide, the peoples of the globe." [6] Celente predicts that Christianity and other established religions will disintegrate because of their hypocrisy, as people seek a global religion that supports their individual lifestyles. In Celente's New Age argument, the Great Commission is no longer relevant to human spirituality, which has outgrown the boundaries of any one religion.

Mission as Globalization

Arguments suggesting that the Great Commission is finished have in common the discourse of "globalization." Globalization, according to sociologist of religion Roland Robertson, "refers both to the compression of the world

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and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.”⁷ It connotes the “increasing interconnectedness of the world as a single place, and the consequences and dynamics of this growing interconnectedness . . .”⁸ Christianity, with its global outreach and expansion, participates in this phenomenon of globalization in the contemporary age. Today, in both the conservative and progressive discussions, the worldwide spread of Christianity has become *prima facie* evidence for the decreasing importance of the Great Commission in the 21st century. These views are problematic for Protestants for whom the Great Commission remains central to their tradition, but who reject a relationship between missions and Western expansionism or imperialism. Unease about the connection between economic globalization and missionary Christianity is the twenty-first century version of the twentieth-century concern about the relationship between colonialism and Christian mission. The darker side of economic globalization, with its destruction of local cultures by forces of global capitalism, technologies, and consumerism and the growing imbalance between rich and poor, also raises questions about the Great Commission.⁹ Even as we celebrate the worldwide spread of Christianity, critics implicate the Great Commission as the ideological core of a dominant Western socio-economic system of privilege. What is the relationship of the Great Commission to economic globalization? Should North Americans still go overseas as missionaries, when peoples in poor parts of the world associate them with oppressive wealth, political domination, and a culture of materialism?

The destruction of New York’s world trade center towers by Islamic radicals from the Middle East on September 11, 2001, underscored the reality of an interconnected world. As global economic integration relentlessly marches forward, groups of people fearful of losing their traditional cultures deliberately reinforce their own local identities of ethnicity, race, and religion. Yet reinforcing the local aspects of one’s identity and then exporting that identity to other parts of the world is, itself, part of the process of globalization. When I was growing up in Southern Louisiana, things like barbequed redfish, boiled crawfish, fried okra, and dark-roasted coffee were part of our local culture. Then with the globalization of Cajun food, blackened redfish became a choice item of cuisine all over the world. When I go to remote eateries in Zimbabwe, I can find Tabasco sauce from Avery Island, Louisiana, on the table. Something that was only recently part of a local identity, namely Cajun food, has been redefined and commodified in the brave new world of global marketing. The local is no longer separate from the global. Rather, the two are intertwined in a process sometimes referred to as “glocalization.” The very identity of local culture becomes

reified through the process of globalization.

As a historian, I agree with those who argue that world Christianity is one of the chief examples of what we call globalization. It is not enough merely to examine globalization as a *context* in which mission operates. Instead, the Great Commission itself has been an intrinsic part of the globalization process. Roland Robertson argues that religious discourse is where discussions of globalization first emerged. Orlando Costas, whom we honor in this book of essays, saw himself as part of the globalization of mission: in North America he witnessed to Latin American needs and realities, and in Latin America he was a bridge figure to the North. The following analysis suggests some of the ways in which the Protestant missionary movement, as shaped by the Great Commission, is intertwined with globalization in its varied forms.

1. Theological Basis

Today's Christianity can be considered an example of globalization because the vision of the Kingdom of God has always provided the central theological framework for the Protestant mission movement.¹⁰ The practical work of cross-cultural mission has been done against the backdrop of God's reign, a vision of humankind united under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, with people called from every nation, tongue and tribe.¹¹ The Good News in Jesus Christ is intended for everyone; that is, the message is a universal one.

In an age when the geographic spread of Christianity is taken for granted, it is hard to recapture how strange it seemed for missionaries to leave forever everything they had known and to venture on tiny ships into foreign lands. Going to places where they did not know the language or the customs and they lacked medical care, friends, and protection, they went prepared to die. While the early Protestant missionaries were certainly motivated by their desire to save souls from eternal damnation rather than to become martyrs, their writings demonstrate that the great millennial vision of the Kingdom, of the Lamb upon his throne surrounded by believers from all nations, was the inspiration that enabled many of them to sacrifice their lives.

In short, a primary theological warrant for the globalization of the church is the vision of the Kingdom of God – the vision hoped for in the Great Commission's command to go to all nations. As believers come from all nations, they enter a universal fellowship. Yet, because the Gospel must become part of each culture it enters, the many churches of the world have

unique ways of living out the Gospel truths in their own cultures. In some ways, then, “globalization” has been an intrinsic part of the missional vision for the Kingdom of God. Indigenous theology within the framework of global church unity has been a self-conscious goal of the Protestant missionary movement, at least since the early twentieth century.¹²

2. Historical Connections

Historians agree that Protestantism as a global phenomenon has accompanied the spread of capitalism. While missionaries have often been the last line of defense for indigenous peoples against exploitation by commercial and political interests, the Western missionary movement and capitalism nevertheless emerged together in human history during the 1700s, and were products of the same forces. The birth of capitalism and the birth of the voluntary missionary agency were part of the same phenomenon of liberating the human being from exploitation by hereditary monarchy, chieftainship, or religious hierarchy. Capitalism and voluntary mission societies replaced the older Christendom model of missions based upon a state supported church with a more democratizing notion that anyone could choose his/her religion, and even become a missionary to propagate particular points of view.

William Carey was breaking with a state church tradition in advocating that groups of volunteers be sent into the world to offer the Christian religion to the so-called “heathen.” Carey’s theological reinterpretation of the Great Commission broke with the hyper-Calvinism of the eighteenth century Baptists by arguing that people were capable of choosing to follow Christ if given the chance to do so. In short, God’s grace could be appropriated by human cooperation.

Equally significant to Carey’s theological formulations was his use of merchant capitalism as one means for the enactment of Christian mission. Carey noted in the *Enquiry* that merchant ships were traversing the world for the sake of material gain. If British merchants were risking their lives halfway around the world, were not devout Christians capable of doing the same for a more noble purpose? [note: I do not wish Constrained by Jesus’ Love to be added here, as this is my own analysis, and certainly that of many others who read the primary texts. I am working off Carey, not Van den Berg] The global reach of British trade, and along with the British Empire, provided the physical means for the global spread of Protestantism. As a model for the voluntaristic missionary society, Carey used the trading company. Merchants founded trading companies in which selling

shares raised the cash needed to invest in trade goods and to send agents to the foreign markets. The shareholders shared the profit and losses, depending on the success of the venture. Such voluntary trading companies could be imitated by mission organizations. Members of a denomination, for example, Baptists or Anglicans, could become shareholders by virtue of providing financial support for a missionary. The venture showed a “profit” if the missionary made converts, and it failed if the missionary died or showed no results.¹³

This essentially capitalist model, known as the “voluntary society,” became the norm through which western Protestantism channeled its early missionary zeal. By the 1820s, voluntary mission-sending societies composed of like-minded people existed in the United Kingdom, Continental Europe, and the United States. Since the first task of these voluntary societies was to scout locations where missionaries could flourish, it is no wonder that many of the mission fields of the early 1800s were located in European spheres of influence – for example, India, or the Middle East. Missionaries often rode on merchant ships under colonial protection to get to the mission field. Often the only other Europeans with whom they could socialize were colonial officials or merchants stationed in the various mission countries. The early nineteenth-century New England towns, which comprised the heart of American trading networks with the South Pacific and China, also provided America’s first foreign missionaries.

In other words, emerging global capitalism was the unwitting mid-wife of the Protestant missionary movement. Being incarnate in the world of frail humanity meant using the spread of capitalism and colonialism to facilitate church expansion. Even though secular merchants and government officials were often at odds with the ethical stances of the missionaries – for example early missionary opposition to the slave trade – the missionaries used the emerging capitalist infrastructure to spread the Gospel. Anti-slavery missionaries connected with the Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society also believed in introducing Western agriculture and commerce to help African converts improve themselves and to thwart the European colonialists and slavers, a philosophy characterized as the “Three C’s” of Christianity, commerce, and cultivation (later civilization). Another important factor in the spread of revivalistic Protestantism around the world was the stationing of evangelical soldiers in British outposts. The spread of Methodism by soldiers and colonists around the world in the early 1800s was the beginning of the globalization of evangelical Christianity. Even as Methodism remained a fairly small movement in Great Britain itself, it exploded among the transient European popula-

tions in places like North America, Australia, and India.¹⁴ The expansionism of capitalism and the geographic spread of European colonialism provided contexts in which popular Protestantism became a global phenomenon.

3. The Post-World War II Expansion of the Church

After World War II, Christianity spread throughout the world. In the year 1900, approximately one-third of the world was Christian, and Europeans composed 70.6 percent of the world's Christian population. By the year 2000, approximately one-third of the world was still Christian, but the European percentage of that total had shrunk to twenty-eight percent. Africa and Latin America combined provided forty-three percent of the total Christian population. A major demographic shift thus occurred as Christianity grew in the non-Western world, but declined in Europe and remained largely unchanged in North America.

Most missiological writings about globalization refer specifically to this demographic shift in the Christian population: the typical Christian in the twenty-first century is a Latin American or African woman. One of the most interesting factors about this rapid growth is that it largely occurred after the end of European colonialism. Even though colonialism and capitalism provided an infrastructure for the western missionary movement, indigenous forms of Christianity that explicitly rejected western control emerged throughout the colonial world in the early twentieth century. On the eve of the communist takeover in China in 1948, for example, twenty-five percent of the Christians were already members of indigenous Chinese churches.¹⁵ And when communism drove Christianity underground, church growth continued under indigenous leadership. By the 1920s, a couple of dozen independent denominations had emerged in the Philippines. In Africa, indigenous churches were seen by the colonizers as dangerous, anti-colonial movements, and were sometimes met with force.

But with the end of colonialism beginning in the 1960s, groups of Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were free to assert their own identity without being accused of being lackeys of Western interests. So-called mission churches, like Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Presbyterianism, grew exponentially after independence. To take Anglicanism, for example, by the year 2000, there were 17 million baptized Anglicans in Nigeria, compared to only 2.8 million Episcopalians in the United States. At the 1998 Lambeth Conference, which is the highest consultative body of the Anglican Communion, 224 of the 775 bishops were from Africa, compared with only 139 from the United Kingdom and Europe.¹⁶

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For the past twenty years, perhaps the feature of world Christianity attracting the most attention has been the rapid growth of Pentecostalism around the world. Similar to the spread of Methodism in the early 1800s, the growth of Pentecostalism has occurred as people have been displaced from their homes and have begun worshipping with Christians from other language groups and backgrounds. Its attention to healing, signs of the spirit, and a liberating ecstatic worship style provide an appealing alternative to the old-fashioned Western formality of the mainline denominations.

The globalization of world Christianity in terms of its demographic spread shows that the interaction between global and local, among other factors, is giving it strength. The universal nature of the Gospel is a powerful attraction to Christians who have moved from place to place, are suffering under incompetent governments, and crave the connection with like-minded persons of other races and cultures. In some settings, Christianity has served as a vehicle of modernization and of ideals of individual human rights and democracy. Simultaneously, the ability of the Gospel to adapt to local situations gives it vitality and relevance for the people. The interaction between the local and the global are a keen indicator of Christianity's participation in the globalization process in the early twenty-first century.

4. Structures of Mission Today

A fourth way in which mission is a part of the phenomenon of globalization is in the technological base and structural organization of mission itself. Since the first century C.E., when Christians used codices, or books, in far greater numbers than members of other religions, to Gutenberg's printing press and the first printed Bible in 1455 and the use of radio and television in the twentieth century, the spread of the Gospel has relied on the cutting edge of "information technology." With its computers, databases, statisticians, and web sites, the Great Commission is riding the wave of technological expansion just as it hitchhiked on the capitalist trading ships and colonial armies of the nineteenth century. Despite Christianity's relative poverty compared to corporate business, evangelical Christianity has one of the most highly developed technological presences of any religious force in the world. The explosion of web-related mission information in the early twenty-first century is a revolution of information comparable to the expansion of print media on the American frontier of the early 1800s, and in West Africa in the early 1900s. As scholars have frequently demonstrated, access to new sources of information can by themselves facilitate the founding and strengthening of Christian movements in new soil. Historian An-

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drew Walls makes the point that the infrastructures of many missions in Africa are stronger than that of the countries themselves.¹⁷ Many of these evangelical networks have allied with others to pursue common global strategies; for example, the goal of the A.D.2000 and Beyond Movement to plant a church in every people group by the year 2000 and Global Mapping (GMI) as a clearinghouse for information about the task of world evangelization.

In older mainline denominations, globalization has facilitated a more entrepreneurial, para-church approach than the bureaucratic, corporate boardroom model that had become dominant by the 1970s. By the 1990s, it was clear that a more flexible model of mission leadership needed to evolve. Instead of controlling the mission initiatives of the church, denominational structures saw themselves as facilitating the mission activities of a vast network of local churches. In many mainline churches, new definitions of partnership are reflecting the ability of local or regional units to enter into mutually-supportive relationships with Christians in other parts of the world. The explosion of decentralized “partnerships” is accompanied by the exponential increase in short-term “mission trips” by North Americans. Every year, millions of twenty-first century Americans are going on two-week or less cross-cultural mission trips. This recent deprofessionalization of missions is a direct result of the globalization of communications, transportation, and currency flows that make it possible for a middle-class church to function as its own private mission agency.

5. The Globalization of the Mission Force

The missionary force of the 21st century has itself been globalized. Whether within the World Council of Churches or the Lausanne Movement for World Evangelization, in the last twenty-five years, much of the leadership for Protestant missions has been provided by people from the two-thirds world. Larry Keyes calculated that by the mid-1990s, there were an estimated 88,000 missionaries from the two-thirds world being sent by 1600 non-Western agencies. Non-Western missions were growing over five times faster than western ones.¹⁸ Even western missionaries were becoming multi-cultural. Orlando Costas, for example, served as a Latino missionary with the Latin American Mission, a North American faith mission. The Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut, probably the most important residential community for missionaries on furlough, has far more Burmese and Korean missionaries than it can accommodate, whereas not long ago, its primary population were Western missionaries. Even though churches in Western countries still control most of the economic resources of the worldwide missionary movement, it is the missionaries from Brazil,

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Korea, Ghana and other nonwestern countries who are the visible face of mission in the 21st century. These nonwestern missionaries have made the old ecumenical slogan come true: "mission to and from all six continents." Devotion to the Great Commission on the part of non-westerners show that its expansionary appeal is not confined to western Christianity.

The Great Commission in a Globalized Future

For the past quarter century, mission scholars have been in agreement that world Christianity has entered an entirely new phase of global mission. The question remains what globalization means for the future of the Great Commission in the 21st century. Lutheran missiologist Richard Bliese suggests that, theologically, globalization points to a number of areas that demand our attention, including such things as what is traditionally referred to as "catholicity," a global theological anthropology and reflection on the human condition, Christian mission in relationship to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and the global responsibility to struggle against injustices as part of Christian witness, evangelism, and mission.¹⁹

Given the historical importance of the Great Commission for Protestant missions, Christians have more to gain by recontextualizing it for a global age than by abandoning it. Its historical importance and its commonality across both ecumenical and evangelical traditions are too important to push it aside, not to mention its theological basis. Rather, we must seek a holistic and broad interpretation of the Great Commission. We must *both* broaden it from the narrow definition of church planting among unreached peoples *and* avoid cynical formulations that paint it as simply the ideological heart of Western colonial oppression. The mainline churches find themselves caught between the extremes of a narrow interpretation of the Great Commission, and the secular criticisms of the age. The following suggestions may help us move beyond this impasse and reaffirm the Great Commission for the twenty-first century.

1. Proclaim Christ rather than Western Economic Interests

First, we should break the connections between globalization in an economic sense and the theological vision of the Kingdom of God. The associations among capitalism, modernization, and Great Commission Christianity can be traced back to the days of William Carey and early Methodism. In an age of globalization, it is legitimate to ask whether disproportionate attention to numerical growth owes more to Western economic and cultural

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expansionism or to a gospel of prosperity, than to biblical Christianity. To the best of our abilities, our interpretation of the Great Commission must emphasize proclaiming Christ without proclaiming Western economic self interests.

Let us reexamine the Great Commission in light of pre-expansionist models of Christian mission by using 2 Corinthians 4:5-6 as a model for twenty-first century mission: "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." One of the advantages of placing these words of the Apostle Paul alongside the Great Commission is that they focus on the glory of God rather than on human volition, organization, and efficiency. Prior to the age of capitalist expansion, seeking to glorify God was a primary motive for Protestant mission. The God whom the Puritans sought to glorify was the Creator who inaugurated human existence by bringing light forth from darkness. Through the face of Jesus Christ, God the Creator has shone light not only in the cosmos, but in the human heart. If our mission is to extol the glory of God, we can shift our vision away from the profit motive or the success syndrome that haunts so much of the American psyche, including missionary Christianity.

In an age in which the church has finally spread all over the world, it behooves Western Christians to focus more on what it means to be faithful to the God of Jesus Christ. Criticism of globalization has parallels with the struggle over colonialism that confronted missions after World War II. At that time, prophetic mission theologians like Hendrik Kraemer and Max Warren emphasized the separation of Christ from Western culture as a precondition for the health of world Christianity. Warren emphasized a mission of "Christian Presence" in which Western missionaries would cultivate a "theology of attention" to other peoples, cultures and religions.²⁰ Missionaries of Christian presence create a climate of integrity in which the message is proclaimed through deeds and not just words. In the wake of 9/11, the leading evangelical Islamicist, Dudley Woodberry, suggested that American missionaries have to withdraw from Muslim countries in favor of nationals from other countries.²¹ To avoid confusing the message with the messengers, it becomes necessary for the globalized church to decide which ethnic and national groups can most effectively witness to Jesus Christ in particular settings. If we can separate the Great Commission from capitalist expansion, then our mission is clarified as one that glorifies God rather than ourselves or our Western way of life.

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“For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake.” These stirring words of the Apostle Paul should be reclaimed as basic to the missionary message of the twenty-first century. There are quite a number of famous missionaries who became bicultural through the actual experience of being enslaved and then became effective cross-cultural communicators; for example, Ulfilas the translator of scripture into Gothic; St. Patrick the English former slave of the Irish; Samuel Adjayi Crowther, recaptured Yoruba slave who became the first African Anglican bishop and great missionary; and Anthony Ulrich, a former slave from the West Indies who persuaded Count Zinzendorf to send Moravian missionaries to his homeland. Paul was writing to the Christians in Corinth that he was willing to be their slave for the sake of the Gospel. He was willing to serve them, to be humble and not put himself forward in his efforts to glorify God. Perhaps when we talk about Pauline models of mission we should emphasize Paul’s willingness to serve as a slave, rather than the usual focus on “Pauline” financial self-support. As we seek to imitate Paul in his preaching of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to proclaim Christ only, devoid of our Western egos. To see God glorified in the face of Jesus Christ means we must unmask our economic privilege as Western Christians, so that we do not make the mistake of putting our own faces where Jesus Christ’s ought to be.

2. Rediscover the Great Commission as a Spiritual Discipline.

Another way to emphasize the Great Commission in the twenty-first century is to rediscover it as a spiritual discipline. Those in the Wesleyan tradition have always considered spiritual growth an ongoing and necessary process in the Christian life. But geographic expansion is not the only definition of what it means for believers to “go into all the world”; we must bear faithful witness both at home and in distant places. I do not believe that witnessing across barriers of culture, race, and nationality is a task that can ever be completed, because the health of the church and our personal spiritual growth depend on it. The exploding populations in the two-thirds world mean that there will always be a “mission field” among the evolving cultures of the world’s young people, and the health of the church depends on growing and deepening our relationship to God through profound obedience to the Word. Especially for Protestants, devotion to the Great Commission is a critical marker of spiritual vitality, and points to the core of what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. We must always be prepared to testify to the hope within us (I Peter 3:15), both in our local com-

munities, and throughout the world that God has made. In the spiritual sense, the Great Commission can never be completed this side of the New Creation.

3. Emphasize the Didactic Function of the Great Commission

In the twenty-first century, we should shift our focus to the second half of the Great Commission, “teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” A shift to the didactic function of the Great Commission is not a repudiation of “going into all the world,” but a corrective that resonates with previous interpretations of the Great Commission. When women first became Protestant missionaries in the early 1800s, they focused on the teaching aspect of the Great Commission. They saw themselves as teaching women around the world and helping them achieve human dignity in relation to abusive social systems.²² Holistic mission has always put equal weight on the discipleship and evangelistic aspects of going “into all the world.”²³ Bishop Kenneth Carder spoke of the Great Commission in his opening remarks to the Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church in 2002, when serving as its President. He stated, “We must continue to move beyond exclusive personal experiences in terms of what it means to make disciples of Jesus Christ. . . . Making disciples of all nations has to do with transforming communities, as well as human hearts; the creation of communities of love, of grace, of justice and hospitality that look like Jesus Christ.”²⁴

The urgency of the didactic function of the Great Commission becomes apparent in light of the rapid expansion of the church in the late twentieth century. In new Christian areas, there is a desperate need for religious instruction and for ethical reflection on the relationship between the gospel message and socio-political struggles. People may have joined the church, but their understanding of the Gospel is limited by their lack of formation in Christian beliefs and practices. The hunger for basic teaching on the meaning of the Bible and the meaning of the Christian faith is overwhelming. The very success of the Great Commission as a motivator to send Christians “into all the world” means that the command to “teach all that I have commanded you” has become an urgent priority in areas where church growth has been rapid and recent. If we fail to incorporate the teaching of the meaning of the holistic Gospel in our mission work, then we will be like the sowers who threw the seed into shallow ground. The plants grew quickly, but then withered because their roots were stunted.

4. Ground Ourselves in the New Testament Church

The Great Commission in the twenty-first century must be regrounded in the New Testament church. When Christ commanded his disciples to go into all the world, he was not speaking to people whose nation was the strongest country in the world or possessed of modern technology, unlimited transportation resources, or pension plans for missionaries. Rather, the Great Commission was a sign of hope among simple, persecuted believers whose leader had been crucified and then raised from the dead. Christian tradition claims that Thomas went to India, Philip to Africa, Peter to Rome, Mark to Egypt, and Paul to Spain. The disciples witnessed across national and ethnic boundaries not because they were powerful, but because they were faithful to the vision of the Kingdom of God they had glimpsed in Jesus Christ.

The true context for the Great Commission is that of the persecuted minority church, not our dominant Western culture. Like in the New Testament church, Christians in an age of globalization are rediscovering a theology of the cross. As Christianity grows in minority communities around the world, we see renewed persecution against believers. Christians who witness in the world today must be prepared to be arrested by Islamic authorities in Saudi Arabia, or captured by revolutionaries in Colombia, or harassed by the Chinese government, or abused for supporting minority and human rights in places like Rwanda, Indonesia, and India—or ridiculed by secular intellectuals in the West.

For North Americans, it is difficult to disassociate ourselves from the trappings of power even if we each take personal vows of poverty. We face the difficult challenge of separating Christian mission from the anonymity of modernization, and the increasing contrasts between wealth and poverty in a global economic system. We are trapped in the culture, which the rest of the world ascribes to us. I am sure I am not the only person who has had the disheartening experience of going to a poor country in the two-thirds world only to be objectified as a representative of Western wealth and, indeed, I am part of that system even as I struggle to live out my Christian commitments. Missionaries are trapped between the needy and unreached of the world and the material resources of the West. All over the world, there are missionaries in vulnerable situations, scapegoats of the resentment against globalization and Western dominance. For North Americans, our mission in the 21st century may mean glorifying God as slaves, just as Paul was willing to do in 2 Corinthians 4:5-6. The Great Commission was a victorious statement of Resurrection, but its backdrop was the experience of the Cross.

CONCLUSION: A Resurrection Vision

In the final analysis, to follow and live out the Great Commission in the twenty-first century means to continue anticipating God's kingdom of peace and justice for all. In other words, the Great Commission has an eschatological dimension; it commands us to work for the inbreaking Kingdom of God, for the New Creation, while we remain in the midst of the world still groaning toward completion. We live as signs of hope to all the world. The hope for all of God's people, united in justice and truth under Jesus Christ, is a Resurrection vision that sustains people around the world. This Christian message of hope is not finished, as God's reign presses toward fulfillment. Rather, it is the deeper meaning that lies at the heart of the Great Commission.

End Notes

- ¹ Luis Bush, "Where Are We Now? Evaluating Progress on the Great Commission," *Mission Frontiers* (June 2000):15.
- ² *Ibid.*, 16.
- ³ Ralph Winter quoted in *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁴ While less widely-known than his evangelistic "crusades," Billy Graham's sponsorship of the Lausanne movement and of global meetings of nonwestern evangelists has been extremely important for evangelical missions.
- ⁵ See Robert Schreiter's works on reconciliation as a model for mission, including *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), and *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998). See also William R. Burrows, "Reconciling All in Christ: The Oldest New Paradigm for Mission," *Mission Studies* 15-1, 29 (1998):79-98.
- ⁶ Michael Ryan, "Wondering What's Next," *The Boston Globe Magazine* (December 30, 2001): 27.
- ⁷ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 8.
- ⁸ Richard H. Bliese, "Globalization," in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. Karl Müller, Theo Sundermeier, Stephen B. Bevans, and Richard H. Bliese (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997):172.
- ⁹ For an overview of the injustices that accompany global capitalism, see Ian Linden, *A New Map of the World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003).
- ¹⁰ Other arguments can be made for Catholicism as globalizing force, but I am concerned with the modern period and the Protestant era.
- ¹¹ The Kingdom of God metaphor in no way implies that the dominant Western forms of government, culture, and economics are embedded in this vision of God's reign, as today's critics sometimes charge and earlier genera-

tions of missionaries, at times, might have believed.

- ¹² See Dana L. Robert, "The First Globalization: The Internationalization of the Protestant Missionary Movement Between the World Wars," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26:2 (April 2002):50-66.
- ¹³ Because of the heavy loss of life, critics of the early missionary movement attacked it as wasteful. In response, missionary supporters interpreted missionary losses not as failures, but as spiritual successes because of the profound witness of martyrdom. For the process by which missionary death was transformed into spiritual victory, see the case of the first U.S. missionary martyr, Harriet Newell. Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997):40-42.
- ¹⁴ See David Hempton, *An Empire of the Spirit: The Rise of Methodism in a New World Order c. 1730-1880* (Yale University Press, 2004).
- ¹⁵ Daniel H. Bays, "The Growth of Independent Christianity in China, 1900-1937," in *Christianity in China: From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Bays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 310.
- ¹⁶ Dana L. Robert, "Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24:2 (April 2000): 53.
- ¹⁷ See Andrew Walls' analysis of mission-state relations in Africa since Independence, in "Africa in Christian History: Retrospect and Prospect," *The Journal of African Christian Thought* 1 (No. 1, 1998):2-16.
- ¹⁸ Larry Keyes, "Non-Western Mission Boards and Societies," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000):696.
- ¹⁹ Bliese, "Globalization," *Dictionary of Mission*, pp.176-177.
- ²⁰ Max Warren was head of the Church Missionary Society during the mid twentieth century, when the mission movement was grappling with the effects of nationalism and decolonization. His edited "Christian Presence" series reflected missionary attempts to take a post-colonial stance toward non-Christian faiths. Dutch missiologist Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (1938) remains the classic text of a missionary theology of "biblical realism." On the missiological context of the mid-twentieth century, see Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994):105-117, 138-143.
- ²¹ J. Dudley Woodberry, "Terror, Islam and Mission: Reflections of a Guest in Muslim Lands," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 26:1 (January 2002):2-7.
- ²² Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 3.
- ²³ See, e.g. Max Warren's discussion of the Great Commission in *I Believe in the Great Commission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), and *The Christian Imperative* (London: SCM Press, 1955).
- ²⁴"Making Disciples Means Changing Hearts, Bishop says," United Methodist News Service no. 121 (March 21,2002).