The Not-So-Great Commission, Part One
by Todd Wilken

Everyone calls it “the Great Commission.” And you may assume that Jesus’ final words in Matthew 28:18-20 have always been called “the Great Commission.” They haven’t. In fact, that label is relatively recent. Up until the late 19th century, almost no one called it “the Great Commission.” Dr. Robbie Castleman writes:

*It turns out that this passage may have got its summary label from a Dutch missionary Justinian von Welz (1621-88), but it was Hudson Taylor, nearly 200 years later, who popularized the use of "The Great Commission". So, it seems like Welz or some other Post-Reformation missionary probably coined the term "The Great Commission"...*¹

No one seems to know exactly where the term came from. Regardless, it has stuck. It has done more than that; it has taken on a life of its own.

The aforementioned James Hudson Taylor, a late 19th century missionary (and mission-related quote factory) famously said, “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.” But notice something. Hudson didn’t really say what the Great Commission is, did he?

I think this is part of the problem. We talk about the Great Commission all the time. But I often wonder if that label still refers to the words Jesus spoke in Matthew 28:18-20, or to something else.
I once heard a former president of my denomination preach a sermon urging his hearers to carry out the Great Commission. He did so without making a single reference to the text of Matthew 28. This is not uncommon. I have read entire articles on the Great Commission that never bother to quote, much less explain the biblical text to which the label refers.

What has happened? Matthew 28:18-20 has been pigeonholed. Jesus’ famous last words have been replaced by an idea of a Great Commission that may, or may not have anything to do with those words themselves. This isn’t good.

The result is that most modern champions of the Great Commission actually deny much of what Matthew 28:18-20 says. As a result, their “Great Commission” isn’t so great. I’ll prove it.

**No Authority**

Jesus began the Great Commission, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” This part is often left out, as though it were mere prologue. It isn’t. In fact, the first question any discussion of the Great Commission must answer is: What authority was Jesus talking about?

The easy assumption is that Jesus was saying, “I’m the boss.” Then, he gave us our assignment, our marching orders. But this superficial reading ignores the context of the Great Commission.
Authority is a theme that runs through all of Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus taught with authority (7:29), acted under authority (8:9), gave his disciples authority (10:1), distinguished his authority from that of the world (20:25), and had his authority called into question (21:23-27).

In the Great Commission, Jesus claimed all authority “in heaven and on the earth.” There is a “heaven and earth” connection in Matthew’s Gospel that modern-day champions of the Great Commission overlook. In Matthew 18:18 Jesus told his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Why is this connection overlooked? Probably because Jesus was talking about the authority to forgive sins. The modern-day champions of the Great Commission simply don’t know what to do with that.

But the “heaven and earth” forgiveness connection is unavoidable. It’s also found in Matthew 9:2-8:

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.” And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, “This man is blaspheming.” But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, “Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he then said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home.” And he rose and went home. When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.

What is this authority that Jesus exercised “in heaven and on the earth,” and that he conferred on his disciples? It was not some general, divine authority; it was the specific authority to forgive sins.²

The second question any discussion of the Great Commission must answer is, Why does Jesus say that this authority “has been given to me”?  

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In fact, the very first word out of Jesus’ mouth in the Greek of verse 18 is Ἐδόθη, “has been given.”

Jesus is God. He already possessed all authority. What does it mean that Jesus has been given all authority? Well, it’s not that Jesus didn’t have this authority before, and now had it. That’s not the point. Jesus was saying something else. Jesus was saying, “This authority has been given to me, therefore, I am giving it to you.” He did exactly the same thing after his resurrection in John 20:

“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 any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.” (John 20:21-23; see also John 5:22-23, 26-27)

Jesus had been given “authority on the earth to forgive sins” (Matthew 9) and he gave this same authority to his Church. Why? To make disciples.

It’s all in that little word in Greek, οὖν that begins verse 19. We translate it “therefore.” This little conjunction cannot be ignored, as it often is in the case of the Great Commission. This word connects everything in verse 18 to everything in verse 19. This word connects Jesus’ authority to forgive sins in heaven and on earth with the Great Commission. Jesus commanded that disciples be made based upon, and using his own divine authority to forgive sins.

The Great Commission is nothing less than Jesus conferring to his Church his divine authority to make disciples by conferring his divine authority to forgive sins. A failure to understand this leads to a complete misreading of the Great Commission.
The authority to make disciples IS the authority to forgive sin, and vice versa. Without that sin-forgiving authority, the Church has no authority or ability to make disciples.

However, that’s not how the modern champions of the Great Commission read the verse. For them, making disciples isn’t about Jesus authority or forgiving sin; it’s about influence, persuasion and closing the deal. And, you don’t need divine authority, or even the forgiveness of sins to do that. You only need the best plan, technique and execution. This explains why modern champions of the Great Commission put so much emphasis on the process of making disciples. For them, it’s all about the process. Just a few examples should suffice, from none other than the leading lights of the Great Commission today, Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church, and Rick Warren of Saddleback Church:

People go through a process in coming to Christ — a process. And I believe in and respect that process.³

When you honor and validate the process people go through in coming to Christ, many of them will be willing to get started. Your approach tells them you really understand what they’re going through as they take those difficult steps toward faith.⁴

If we push or rush them, they’ll back out of the process. But if we allow them to move at their own pace, we’ll be able to help them gradually progress until, eventually, God brings them to the point of crossing the bridge and trusting Christ.⁵

Jesus had a process by which He took people from no faith in Christ to deep disciple. The very first words of Jesus that He says to His

[Image]
disciples are “Come and see.” Now that’s the entry point for faith. ... And from “Come and see,” He took them through consistent steps. ...Churches have not understood that commitment is sequential, systematic, and processed.

How do you get people from “Come and see” to “come and die”? ...There are classes, there are covenants, there are commitments, there are cells, there’s coaching. Jesus used one to group, one on one, one to large group, and all of these have to be built into discipleship.... Most churches don’t have a systematic, sequential process by which they move people from unbeliever to member, to maturing member, to minister, to missionary. But that’s what we’ve been doing for 28 years... that only happens when you’ve got an intentional process to move them through.⁶

Notice what is missing: Jesus’ authority to forgive sins. The disciple-making “process” has replaced Jesus’ divine authority given to the Church to forgive sins. And that’s just the beginning. What else is missing from the not-so-Great Commission of today?

No Disciples

The vocabulary of Christian Church has been changing. Old, biblical words are being replaced with new, sociological ones. We used to talk about sinners, now we talk about seekers. We used to talk about unbelievers, now we talk about the unchurched. We used to talk about repentance, now we talk about response.

Willow Creek and churches like it have pioneered the new vocabulary and its definitions. Jesus said, “Make disciples.” But Willow Creek’s goal is “to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ.”⁷ Is there a difference? Let’s see.

The Willow Creek Association teaches that church members should be classified within four “segments” along a “spiritual growth continuum.” This continuum includes both non-Christians and Christians, and is measured by

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“higher levels of spiritual attitudes” and an “increase in spiritual behaviors.”

The four segments are:

1) Exploring Christ: “I believe in God, but I am not sure about Christ. My faith is not a significant part of my life.”
2) Growing in Christ: “I believe in Jesus and I am working on what it means to get to know him.”
3) Close to Christ: “I feel really close to Christ and depend on him daily for guidance.”
4) Christ-Centered: “My relationship with Jesus is the most important relationship in my life. It guides everything I do.”

People at the top of this spiritual continuum are referred to as “fully devoted” Christ followers.

Notice what is missing: Disciples. How can disciples be missing from the church-growth gurus’ reading of the Great Commission? Disciples in the New Testament are believers, and all believers are disciples. Yet, the modern champions of the Great Commission have divorced “disciple” from “believer.” More than that, it’s unclear where along their spiritual continuum a person is made a disciple, or if that word even applies anymore.

Also notice what has taken the place of disciples. Lots of adjectives: “exploring, growing, close, devoted, sold-out, etc.” The Great Commission contains absolutely no such adjectives. There are no exploring, growing, close, devoted or sold out disciples, just disciples. Again, disciples are believers and all believers are disciples.
No Baptism

What was Matthew 28:18-20 before it was dubbed “the Great Commission?” It may surprise you to learn that it was considered the “words of institution” for Christian Baptism. Yet this shouldn’t surprise anyone. Baptizing and teaching are essential to the Great Commission; it’s right there in the grammar of Jesus’ words. Let’s diagram the sentence.

Diagramming verse 19 allows us to visualize the grammatical relationships within the verse. This is very revealing. There is a lot more happening in this verse than most English translations show, or most champions of the Great Commission admit.

Diagramming verse 19 also allows us to translate the verse correctly:

*Therefore, when you go, disciple [make disciples of] all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [and] by teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*
This sounds a little different from the Great Commission you’re familiar with, doesn’t it? It should. It isn’t that most English translations are incorrect; but most fail clearly to reflect these grammatical relationships within the text. And this is crucial for understanding exactly what Jesus is saying.

What is different about this reading of the Great Commission? First, the word “go” is not translated as an imperative, or a command. That’s because it is not an imperative verb; it is a participle, “When you go”. The reason it is usually translated as an imperative is that this participle is linked to the imperative verb, “make disciples.” That’s fine. But, I want to highlight the fact that the word “go” is not the main verb of the sentence; grammatically, it cannot be. The main verb is “make disciples.”

This means that the Great Commission is not about going; it is about making disciples. This means that the Great Commission is not something that happens away from, or apart from the Church. This means that the proclamation of the Gospel in church is just as much “mission” and “making disciples” as the proclamation of the Gospel outside the church.

Second, you will notice the phrases, “by baptizing them …by teaching them.” These two words are also participles. In this case, they specify the means by which the action of the main verb “make disciples” takes place.

This is very important. **Baptizing and teaching are not incidental or secondary to making disciples. They are not actions separate from making disciples. Baptizing and teaching are how disciples are made.** This is hardly a new insight, Dr. Robert Kolb has written:

> This command consists of an imperative and three auxiliary verbs, which are participles, The first, “going,” presumes that his followers will find places to which God sends them: “when you have gotten

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where you are headed” is the force of this aorist participle. The command itself is simple, “make disciples.” How is this done? The command is explained through the use of two present participles, “baptizing” and “teaching.” …Baptizing is clearly God’s action, as Jesus had explained it (John 3:5) and as Paul (Titus 3:5) and Peter (1 Pet. 3:21) would. God creates disciples.11

By contrast, Bill Hybels writes about the Great Commission:

The second aspect of this challenge comes from the words, “go and make disciples of all nations.” It’s clear that Jesus wasn’t expecting that to happen through diplomacy or political effort. Rather, it would come about as a result of their actual going and getting in close proximity to the people who they hoped to influence. In doing so, they’d have the opportunity to start relationships and naturally influence the people they’ve gotten to know. Next, Jesus emphasized that as they made disciples they should teach them.12

Notice that Baptism is missing, just left out entirely. How can Hybels ignore Jesus’ words about Baptism while reading of the Great Commission? Simple, Hybels holds an unscriptural view of Baptism. According to this view, Baptism has no necessary connection to making disciples. At best, it is a symbolic ordinance to be observed after disciples have been made. Hybels doesn’t know what to do with Baptism in the Great Commission. So, he just skips it.

For his part, Rick Warren at least includes Baptism in his explanation of the Great Commission, but explicitly denies that Baptism does anything in regard to making disciples:

For years I wondered why Jesus’ Great Commission gives the same prominence to baptism as it does to the great tasks of evangelism and edification. Why is baptism so important? Then I realized it is because it symbolizes God’s second purpose of your life: participating in the fellowship of God’s eternal family. Baptism doesn’t make you a member of God’s family; only faith in Christ does that.13
Hybels omits Baptism from his reading of the Great Commission. Warren includes it, but says that it has nothing to do with making disciples. Both deny what the Great Commission actually says.

**Next Time in Part 2, “Not All”**

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2 See the Lutheran Confessions, TR 31.

3 G. A. Pritchard, Willow Creek Seeker Services, Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996, p. 106


5 Ibid., p. 159


8 Willow Creek Association, Reveal Spiritual Life Survey, "Key Findings” http://www.revealnow.com/key_findings.asp.

9 AP IX, 2; SC IV, 4; LC Shorter Preface, 20-22; IV, 3-4.

10 This is perfectly legitimate. The same thing occurs in the Resurrection account earlier in the same chapter, verse 7, "Go quickly, tell his disciples... .” The same participle-imperative relationship is found in the “Lesser Commission” in Matthew 10:7 ("As you go, preach...”) and in Mark’s version of the Great Commission in Mark 16:15 ("Going... preach").


12 Hybels and Mittelberg, Becoming a Contagious Christian, p. 215.

The Not-So-Great Commission, Part Two
by Todd Wilken

In Part One of this article we saw that most modern champions of the Great Commission actually deny much of what Jesus says in Matthew 28:18-20. They omit Jesus’ Authority, Baptism, and even Disciples from Jesus’ famous last words. In Part Two, we discover what else is missing from their not-so-Great Commission.

Not All

The word “all” is an important word in the Bible: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5); “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23); “all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). The word “all” is an important word, especially when Jesus says it. And, Jesus says it often in the Great Commission:

_All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, when you go, make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always [Greek: all the days], to the end of the age._

Jesus uses the word “all” 4 times in the space of the 51 Greek words in those verses.
**Not All Authority:** As noted in Part One of this article, the modern champions of the Great Commission ignore Jesus’ authority to forgive sins in their reading of Matthew 28:18-20. While, they wouldn’t deny that Jesus himself possesses this authority, in their reading of the Great Commission, Jesus didn’t confer this authority upon his Church. In their view, Jesus’ command for the Church to make disciples is separate from his own authority to forgive sins. So much for “all authority.” What about the three other occurrences of “all” in the Great Commission?

**Not All Nations:** Jesus commanded his Church to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. This command clearly requires making disciples of all, without limits or qualification. From the time of the apostles, the Church has read the Great Commission as a command to baptize, regardless of nationality, ethnicity, sex or age. Two thousand years of the practice of infant Baptism attest to this interpretation. But how do the modern champions of the Great Commission read Jesus’ words?

...the New Testament records the baptisms of adult believers only. In the Bible, we find parents bringing their children to Jesus. He held them, prayed for them, and told us to welcome them. But He did not baptize them and He did not tell anyone else to baptize them. Willow Creek believes Baptism is for those who have made a personal decision to trust Christ alone for their salvation, once they have the maturity and ability to understand what that means. As a general rule, Willow Creek's Elders have determined that a believer must be at least 12 years old to be baptized...

The same is taught at Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church, where there is also an age restriction placed on baptism:

At Saddleback, we wait until our children are old enough to believe and understand the true meaning of baptism before we baptize them. Some churches practice a "baptism of confirmation" for children.... This is different from the baptism talked about in the Bible which was only for those old enough to believe. The purpose is to publicly confess your personal commitment to Christ.
In Part One, we saw that the modern champions of the Great Commission ignore the grammatical relationship between making disciples and baptizing in the text of Matthew 28:19. While the text clearly states that disciples are made “by baptizing and teaching,” they view Baptism differently, as a symbolic ordinance observed only after disciples have been made by some other means. Now we see that they drive a wedge further between the making of disciples and baptizing by imposing an arbitrary minimum age for Baptism.

What is the result of this age restriction on their reading of the Great Commission? It means that the modern champions of the Great Commission can’t take Jesus’ words “all nations” at face value. According to them, Jesus said “all” but really meant “some.” For them, “all nations” must mean “some people of all nations,” or more to the point, it must mean “only those people of all nations who have reached a certain age.” The problem is that Jesus does not say that in the Great Commission.

The text of Matthew 28:19 says nothing about the age or maturity of those who are to be baptized, nor does any other text of Scripture that speaks of baptism. It says nothing about a minimum age for baptism. The text clearly states that disciples are to be made “of all nations by baptizing... and by teaching” without any qualification whatsoever.
What has happened here? The modern champions of the Great Commission have allowed their unbiblical view of Baptism to exclude an entire category of people from the “all nations” of the Great Commission: the young.

**Not All I Have Commanded You:** One of the saddest ironies in American Evangelicalism today is how strongly its leaders profess that the Bible is the very word of God --inspired, inerrant and infallible-- yet how little of the Bible they actually preach or teach. I suspect that a major cause of biblical illiteracy among American Christians is that the Bible has been replaced in America’s pulpits with popular topics and church programs. Sometimes it seems that Evangelicals can hear anything but the Bible in church.

In the Greek of the Great Commission, Jesus is emphatic about what is to be taught, he says: πάντα ὅσα, “all whatsoever” or “everything.” What is the Church to teach in order to make disciples? Everything. It’s what the old theologians used to call “the whole counsel of God.”

But today’s champions of the Great Commission have decided that teaching has its limits. Several years ago, Willow Creek Community Church did an extensive survey of its membership, asking them if the church was meeting their needs. Head pastor Bill Hybels was surprised and upset by the results, especially the responses of members classified highest on Willow Creek’s spiritual growth continuum: the “Christ-centered, fully devoted Christ followers.” Hybels described it this way:

*A lot of people in this category, they’re saying they’re not being fed, that they want more meat of the Word of God, that they want more serious-minded Scripture taught to them, that they want to be challenged more.... And I started getting a little irritated. I was like, “I’ll feed those people. I’ll hire some old seminary prof. I’ll feed them till they barf!”*
That’s exactly what he said. To make matters worse, Hybels’ audience, made up of pastors and church leaders from all over the world, broke into laughter and applause. What does it say when a Christian pastor responds in this way to his congregation’s cry to be taught the Bible? Hybels considered his members’ desire to be taught God’s Word by the church unreasonable.

Hybels continued:

> We should have started telling people and teaching people that they have to take responsibility to become “self feeders.” We should have gotten people, taught people, how to read their bible between service, how to do the spiritual practices much more aggressively on their own. Because what’s happening to these people, the older they get, the more they’re expecting the Church to feed them, when in fact, the more mature a Christian becomes, the more a Christian should become more of a self-feeder.³

Hybels was saying that the Church may be responsible for teaching all Christ has commanded --but only to a point; after that you’re on your own.

Rick Warren agrees, and he goes even further. He says the problem in the church is “too much teaching.” Speaking via video at the Desiring God conference in 2010, he said, “another weakness of the church today, when it comes to learning, is that we’re not teaching people to be self-feeders. We’re doing all the feeding, instead of teaching them to feed themselves.”⁴ He also complained about his Southern Baptist upbringing and the amount of Bible teaching he had to endure; he sounded like a man at the end of his rope:

> First on Sunday morning I would got to Sunday school, and I was supposed to get an application that was supposed to change my life. Then I would go to morning service, and I get another application that was supposed to change my life. Then I would come back Sunday night to a thing called Church training, and I was supposed to have another application to change my life. And then evening service, with another application to change my life. That’s four on one day. Then I was supposed to come back for midweek prayer and Bible study, where I was to get another application. Then maybe a Thursday morning study, in which I was to have another application. And then I
was to have a quiet time seven days a week. That’s about fourteen applications a week. Friend, your life can’t change that much.

Of course, Warren’s view of the Bible as a how-to manual, and his assumption that every encounter with the Bible should produce a life-changing moral application are the real problem here. If you think that Scripture is essentially a rule book, you’ll consider this amount Bible teaching too much. If you think that the purpose of Bible teaching is to apply those rules to your life, you’ll consider this much teaching unreasonable. But rather than rethink his misconceptions about the Bible, Warren concludes:

We’re teaching them too much. We’re teaching them so much, that they can’t apply it.... There’s a wide gap between knowing and doing in American Christianity. And it’s caused by too much teaching. Before people actually apply what it is, they actually go to the next thing. And they can’t handle it, they can’t change that much.⁵

Notice that neither Hybels or Warren offer any biblical basis for the idea that Christians should eventually graduate from the Church’s teaching and become “self-feeders.” Neither Hybels nor Warren gives any biblical reason for his refusal to feed Christians on the Word of God. Why? Because the Bible’s instruction to pastors is clear. St. Paul wrote:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.... Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.⁶

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.⁷

Church leaders who refuse to be held responsible for teaching can hardly claim to be following the Great Commission. And remarkably, these self-proclaimed champions of the Great Commission interpret Jesus’ command to teach as a command not to teach.
It gets worse. When it comes to the content of teaching, today’s champions of the Great Commission believe that the audience, not the message, is sovereign. Jesus says that the Church should teach everything he has commanded, but they disagree. They say that the Church’s message must be tailored to match the interests of the market. Christian pollster and church-growth guru George Barna describes and prescribes the teaching and preaching of the Church in terms of the marketplace:

*To successfully market your product, you have to identify its prospective market... By matching the appeal of your product to the interests and needs of specific population segments, you can concentrate on getting your product to your best prospects without wasting resources on people who have no need or interest in your product... the product itself can be developed to address the special needs of that segment.*

Again, and not surprisingly, Warren agrees. The customer is always right, whether the customer is ordering coffee or going to church. Offer customers whatever they want:

*You go into Starbucks, do you realize how many different thousands of ways you can get a cup of coffee at Starbucks? You know, half and half, no milk, quarter milk, soy milk, fake milk, put in the mocha, hold out the cappuccino, put in the frappe, take out that, you know, it’s all these different ways. You go into any fast food, you get a choice between small, medium and large or big gulp.Same is true in churches. Which by the way, when I go into a Starbucks and I order a different kind of coffee, which one’s best? The one that’s best for me.*

Again, Church leaders who refuse to teach all that Christ has commanded, but allow the market to dictate what is taught, can hardly claim to be following the Great Commission. And again, these champions of the Great Commission interpret Jesus’ command to teach *all whatsoever* he has commanded as a command to teach *whatever* the customer wants.

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I Am Not with You, Not Really

Matthew’s Gospel and the Great Commission end with this remarkable promise from Jesus, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew’s Gospel begins with a very similar promise, spoken by the angel to Joseph:

"Do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). 10

That Old Testament name “Immanuel” is a direct reference to Jesus’ bodily incarnation. Matthew is telling us that the conception and birth of Jesus is nothing less than the bodily, physical, incarnate presence of God on earth. And so it is no coincidence that Matthew ends his Gospel with Jesus’ promise: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” And again, Jesus’ words are emphatic:

ιδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ’ ὑμῶν ἐμι
behold I with you I am

In Greek, the first person pronoun “I, ἐγὼ” is grammatically unnecessary in this sentence; the verb “I am, εἰμι” is already clear as to its subject.11 Jesus is emphasizing something, namely, that he personally will be with us until the end of the age.

Despite Jesus’ emphasis on his on-going, personal presence with with the Church, many modern champions of the Great Commission make a very common mistake regarding his words. They believe that after his ascension, Jesus occupies a specific location (the right hand of God), and that he cannot be bodily present here on earth. They reason: “Jesus has ascended into

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heaven. Therefore, when he says, ‘I am with you...’ he must mean that he is with us *spiritually, not physically or bodily.*” Rick Warren recently sent a message to his many Twitter followers confirming Jesus’ absence, “The one thing Jesus left behind in this world is his Church. But he will be back to get it.” 12 Elsewhere he writes in a similar vein:

> The mission that Jesus had while on earth is now our mission since we are the Body of Christ. What he did in his physical body, we are to continue as his spiritual body - the church.13

It is a misconception also shared by George Barna:

> The big difference between the plan outlined above and Jesus’ experience are that *He is not here in the flesh to jump-start the process,* and I’m proposing that we start with a hundred thousand people instead of twelve. Neither of those conditions should be a deal breaker, though. **Jesus is present with us spiritually,** and the process is the same regardless of the numbers.14

In this way of thinking, Jesus cannot be both at the right hand of God and here on earth. So then, at his ascension, Jesus withdrew his bodily presence and left only his spiritual presence. That idea might sound reasonable, but it is evidence of a serious misunderstanding of the Incarnation, one that separates the two natures in Christ --and further empties the Great Commission of its meaning.

Am I about to deny that Jesus ascended? Not at all. Jesus has ascended into heaven and is now seated at the right hand of God. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t still present here bodily (albeit invisibly) in his
incarnation. There are two reasons to maintain his ongoing presence. First, the right hand of God is not a particular physical location inside or outside the universe. Second, we cannot separate Jesus’ spiritual presence from his bodily presence.

This is actually very old debate, dating to the Reformation. Regarding the right hand of God, the Reformers were clear. It is:

...no fixed place in heaven, as the Sacramentarians assert without any ground in the Holy Scriptures, but nothing else than the almighty power of God, which fills heaven and earth, in [possession of] which Christ is installed according to His humanity... this is possible to no other man, because no man is in such a way united with the divine nature, and installed in such divine almighty majesty and power through and in the personal union of the two natures in Christ, as Jesus, the Son of Mary.\(^\text{15}\)

At the same time, Martin Luther himself was adamant that the one Person of Christ cannot be divided into a spiritual and physical presence:

Wherever you place God, there you must also place with him his human nature; they [his two natures] do not permit themselves to be separated or divided from each other. They have become one Person, and he does not lay aside the human nature, as a peasant takes off his garment and lays it aside when he goes to bed... Christ’s human nature is more closely united with God than is our skin with our flesh, yes, closer than are body and soul.... you cannot peel the deity from the humanity and put it where there is no humanity; for by that you would separate the Person and make the humanity a mere shell, a coat, which the deity could put on or off according to place or space in which He happens to be.\(^\text{16}\)
In other words, when Jesus says, “I am with you always,” he means it. He means that he is completely with us --according to both natures, divine and human.

As shocking as this may sound to pious Christian ears, Scripture’s clear teaching of Jesus’ incarnation simply doesn’t permit us to think of Jesus as spiritually, but not bodily, present. Even more shocking may be the means by which the Reformers thought Jesus exercises this presence with the Church:

...according to His assumed human nature and with the same, He can be, and also is, present where He will, and especially that in His Church and congregation on earth He is present as Mediator, Head, King, and High Priest, not in part, or one-half of Him only, but the entire person of Christ is present, to which both natures belong, the divine and the human; not only according to His divinity, but also according to, and with, His assumed human nature, according to which He is our Brother, and we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bone. Even as He has instituted His Holy Supper for the certain assurance and confirmation of this, that also according to that nature according to which He has flesh and blood He will be with us, and dwell, work, and be efficacious in us.\textsuperscript{17}

The Reformers taught that when Jesus says, “I am with you always,” he also means his real, bodily presence in the Lord’s Supper. Modern champions of the Great Commission would reject this possibility because they also reject Jesus’ words, “This is my body...This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” For them, Jesus doesn’t mean what he says there either:

\textit{Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, is an ordinance given to all believers by Jesus Christ to \textbf{remember} his sacrifice for us and to \textbf{symbolize} the new covenant. The elements of bread and wine or juice are \textbf{symbols} of Christ’s broken body and shed blood. Communion is not a means of salvation. Rather, it is a \textbf{testament of a believer’s faith} in the atoning work of the cross.}\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, Part 3, chapter 17, section 2.

\textsuperscript{18} Calvin, \textit{Institutes of the Christian Religion}, Part 3, chapter 17, section 3.
Communion is "the believer's meal," a sacrament intended for Jesus' followers, by which they **acknowledge and remember** His work on the cross—the ultimate sacrifice made on our behalf for the forgiveness of the sins of humankind.19

When Jesus says “this is my body,” they say he means “this **symbolizes and reminds you of** my body.” When Jesus says “I am with you always,” they say he means “I am **not** with you, not really.”

On the other hand, how much greater is the Great Commission when we simply take Jesus at his word, “I am with you always”? We use the term, “Jesus’ earthly ministry.” I’ve used it myself thousands of times. We use it to describe the time from Jesus’ conception to his ascension. But perhaps that term says something we don’t want it to say -- that Jesus ended his ministry here on earth at his ascension. He didn’t. Jesus’ earthly ministry continues. He is still exercising his divine authority; he is still making disciples by baptizing and teaching; he is still with us -- **really with us**-- to the end of the age.

Look at it this way: Who made the first disciples? Jesus did. This is what today’s champions of the Great Commission fail to realize:

**Jesus made the first disciples, and Jesus has made every disciple since.** Marketing, programs and processes never made a single disciple. While today’s champions of the Great Commission give lip-service to “Christ’s Mission,” they really believe it is *their* mission. The proof is that they misinterpret, explain away or ignore most of what Jesus actually says in the Great Commission.

Didn’t Jesus tell **us** to make disciples? Yes, but he also told us how disciples will be made, by his authority, by baptizing and teaching, by
him. As St. Paul would say, “we are God's fellow workers... we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”\textsuperscript{20}

Do you see how it all either stands or falls together? Once you deny the “I am with you” of the Great Commission, then baptism, teaching, and disciple-making all become our work, not Jesus’ work. Jesus is reduced to nothing more than a spiritual spectator, a heaven-bound bystander, watching us make disciples. Other than giving us the original command, he really isn’t even necessary, is he?

**Not So Great**

If you look at how Matthew 28:18-20 is read today, you have to conclude that the Great Commission isn’t so great after all. Today’s champions of the Great Commission do not believe that the Church has been given authority to forgive sins on earth. They teach that disciples are made by our effort, powers of persuasion, salesmanship and ingenuity. They think that Baptism is a mere symbol, that does nothing, much less make disciples. They minimize the importance of doctrine, refuse to teach those crying out for God’s Word. All of this, in the name of a Jesus who is absent, or at best, only “spiritually” present. It’s evident that Lutherans who attempt to adopt and adapt the methodologies of Hybels, Warren and other Evangelicals have set themselves a monumental, even impossible, task.

If you deny the efficacy of the Word and Baptism as Means of Grace, if you deny the Church’s authority to forgive sins, if you downplay doctrine, if you deny the on-going bodily presence of Jesus in His Church, what’s left of Jesus’ words in Matthew 28:18-20?

How does the Great Commission read in many churches today?

* I’m in charge. Therefore, go and make fully devoted Christ-followers by a process that moves people along a spiritual growth continuum.*

www.issuesetc.org
After they have started on the continuum, but only when they are old enough, baptize them as a symbol of their commitment and obedience. Teach them, matching your message to their interests. But after they reach the level of fully-devoted Christ-follower, they should be “self-feeders.” And behold, I’ll be with you in spirit, but I am leaving. The rest is up to you.

That isn’t the Great Commission, is it? That doesn’t sound anything like Jesus’ words in Matthew 28:18-20, does it? But that’s what passes for the Great Commission today. What has happened? The Great Commission has been replaced by a Not-So-Great Commission.

It doesn’t have to be this way. Nothing about the Matthew 28:18-20 has changed. Despite what today’s champions of the Great Commission say, Jesus is still with his Church, he is still exercising his divine authority to forgive sins through his Church, he is still making disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. The only people who don’t seem to know it are today’s champions of the not-so-great Commission. They think that Jesus retired from disciple-making 2000 years ago. He didn’t. The reason they have a not-so-great Commission, is that they have a not-so-great Jesus.

Jesus’ Great Commission --the real Great Commission-- is still great. It is great because Jesus himself is great. It is great because it is all about what Jesus has done, and what Jesus continues to do. Did Jesus come to develop a process for moving customers along a spiritual growth continuum until they become fully devoted Christ-followers and self-feeders? No. He came to live, die and rise again as the substitute for a world of sinners. Did he leave his Church to find its own way to make disciples for him? Not at all. He has ascended to fill all things, to be and remain with us as both God and man, in a way even greater than his “earthly ministry.” He is with us even now, and will be until the end of the age, forgiving sins, making disciples for himself by the washing and regeneration of Baptism and by teaching his powerful saving Word.

www.issuesetc.org
"Does Willow Baptize Infants?" http://www.willowcreek.org/childdedication

"Who Should be Baptized?" http://saddleback.com/lakeforest/aboutus/whatwebelieve/baptism/


Ibid.

1 Timothy 4:13-16

2 Timothy 4:1-2


Matthew 1:18-25.

Jesus uses the construction μεθ’ ὑμῶν εἰμι, without the emphatic “ἐγὼ” in Matthew 17:7 (future tense of the verb), and John 7:33; 13:33; 14:9 and 16:4 (past tense of the verb). http://twitter.com/#!/RickWarren/status/10621690897


Solid Declaration VIII, 27-28 ff.

St. Louis Edition of Luther’s Works, Vol. XX: pp. 951f. Also, “Though Christ, also according to his human nature, is even now present with his Church on earth, during the entire period between his ascension and Judgment Day, in accord with his promise: “I am with you alway,” he can, nevertheless, without self-contradiction, return on Judgment Day, since he is now present with his Church according to his invisible mode, with his return will take place according to the visible mode of his substance. So our opponents must discard their canon: “The human nature of Christ has no other mode of subsistence than that which is visible, local and circumscribed.” Ibid., p. 965.

Solid Declaration VIII, 78-79.


1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 5:20