

How to Make Your Life Count

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The Purpose of This Paper

I've heard it said that your perception determines your path and your path determines your destiny. The truth in this statement can be clearly seen as it plays out in our choice of a career path or a spouse. But nowhere is the eternal impact of this truth more profound than in our understanding of, and our response to, the words of Jesus known to us as the Great Commission.

Among other places in the Bible, the Great Commission is found in Matthew 28:19-20, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you . . .*"¹

When I answered God's call to start Mars Hill in 1977, my view of the Great Commission was basically that as Christians we all had one main job description: to win as many people to Christ as possible, to help them grow in their Christian life, and to do as much of the job as we could before His return. Over the next 15 years, Mars Hill produced several films that were used to bring thousands of people to Christ and to mobilize thousands more to share their faith in Christ with others. Our films however were geared mostly for a North American audience.

I could have continued on this path for years thinking I was as effective for God as I could be. But in the early '90s God began helping me see a picture of the Great Commission I had somehow missed in all my previous years of ministry. As my perception changed, my priorities changed. The course of my

life and of Mars Hill followed. I now know of many who share a similar story in coming to see this same picture. And because I believe it is so central to God's purposes in this world I am compelled to share it. I pray you are blessed and He is glorified as a result.

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It is throughout His Word, but I hadn't seen it.

The key God used to unlock my understanding of the Great Commission is the word, "nations." When I used to read that word in Matthew 28:19, I thought Jesus was referring to geopolitical entities; i.e. countries. But the word "nations," which comes from the Greek word "ethnos" actually means "people groups."² Biblically speaking, nations are people groups who are distinct and separated from other groups of people by things such as language, race, culture, tribal affiliation, and religion, as well as by geopolitical boundaries.

How did the nations of our world come to be? After the great flood, God told the sons of Noah to "*be fruitful and fill the earth*" (Gen.1:28, 9:1.) God was telling them to disperse and populate the earth, which over time would have resulted in a wonderful diversity of nations.

(We'll get to why God wanted this in a minute.)

Rather than obeying God, the sons of Noah stayed together in one place as one people. They built a city known as Babel, and then a tower to "*reach into heaven*" (Gen. 11:1-3). God was not pleased. He confused their language so they could not communicate and He scattered them across the earth. From that event emerged at least 70 distinct people groups; the beginning of the nations as we know them today.

In our world today there are not more than a few hundred countries, but researchers have identified at least 16,000 ethno - linguistic people groups, or nations. In the country of India alone there are over 1,000 nations in the Biblical sense of the word. Current research also reveals that many of the nations in our world have not yet had an opportunity to receive the Gospel of Christ. Many experts say that these "unreached" nations number in the thousands.³

And why is this significant? In Matthew 24:14, we read that Jesus said, "*And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come.*"* According to Jesus, the end of the world will not come until the Gospel has been preached in all the world for a witness to every nation. Of course, for those who trust in Him, "the end" is really the beginning. It is the end of evil, suffering, and death, but it is the beginning of everlasting peace.

The subject of the nations is not a minor theme in the Bible. In the first book of the Bible we read God's promise that through the seed of Abraham "*all the nations of the earth shall be blessed*" (Gen. 22:18). In the last book of the Bible we see a grand finale as people "*from every nation*" are gathered to worship the Lamb (Rev.7:9). In between these two accounts, we find well over 500 verses dealing with the nations.

No one can fathom the mind of God. We cannot fully understand why the nations are so important to God, but there is more than enough

revelation in the Bible for us to know that it has to do with the glory of God, with worship, and with His eternal purposes. Just imagine that scene from Revelation 7:9 with countless people from thousands of nations worshipping together in perfect unity. What a different picture from the confusion at the tower of Babel. What a different picture from our world today. Only God can bring unity from such incredible diversity!

Theologian John Piper writes, “*The final goal of all things is that God might be worshipped with white-hot affection by a redeemed company of countless persons from every tongue tribe and nation.*”⁴ At this point we might do well to ask, is that our goal? And if there are really thousands of nations that have not yet had an opportunity to receive the gospel of Christ, then what are we doing about it?

The Church in America is not making it a priority to bring the nations to God. Of all the money that American Christians give to ministry, less than 1% goes to reach the unreached nations of the world!⁵ Why aren't we making it a priority? I believe it comes back to perception ... or perhaps deception.

A False Perception

There once was a group of miners trapped in a mine. They attempted to dig their way to freedom, but eventually gave up believing the task to be impossible. Some time later, their bodies were discovered. They had but a few feet to go before they would have reached an open tunnel.

I believe many Christians have the idea that the Church has been laboring faithfully for thousands of years to complete the Great Commission, and that it may well require a great deal more time to finish the task. This is just not true. For the first few hundred years of its life, the Church had a radical zeal to take the Gospel to every nation. But for the next 1,400 years the Church drifted from its pursuit of this cause.

Not until about 300 years ago was the fire once again ignited as God gave His Church renewed passion and vision for the nations.⁶

Near the close of the 20th century a missions research agency reported this amazing statistic: 70% of all the evangelism that had ever taken place in the history of the Church had taken place since 1900, 70% of that had taken place since 1945, and 70% of that had taken place in the previous 3 years!⁷

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In 1948 there were less than a million Christians in China; in 2008 over 100 million.⁸ Worldwide, 100,000 people a day are turning to Christ; most of them in Africa, Asia, and India.⁹ Contrary to what might be perceived from the media, Evangelical Christianity worldwide is growing two times faster than Islam and three times faster than Buddhism and Hinduism!¹⁰

The Church around the world is closing in on the completion of the Great Commission at a phenomenal rate. But this is a picture I believe most American Christians do not see. I am convinced that, rather than allowing the resources of the Church in America to be unleashed to reach the nations, Satan would want to keep American Christians in the dark, just like those miners.

Blessing, Disobedience, Judgment, and Healing

In Psalm 67:1-2, we find a “national” prayer of Israel, “*God be gracious to us and bless us, And cause His face to shine upon us, that*

Thy way may be known on the earth, Thy salvation among all nations.” There it is again, that theme of the nations. In the Old Testament we see that Israel was blessed so that God might be known among the nations. But with blessing there comes responsibility (i.e., “*who has been given much shall much be required,*” Luke 12:48). What happens when we do not use what God has given us for its intended purpose? What happens when God's people are blessed, but disobedient? In the history of Israel, disobedience often followed blessing, and judgment always followed disobedience.

Judgment often came to Israel in the form of an oppressive foreign army (Neh.9:28, Psa.106:41). Judgment also came to Israel in the form of spiritual blindness (Deu.29:2-4, Isa.6:9-10). People who are spiritually blind often try to remedy their situation by dealing with symptoms rather than root problems. They cannot see relationships of spiritual cause and effect, nor can they fully grasp their need for supernatural healing.

While we cannot compare the role of America in God's plan with that of Israel, I do believe there are lessons to be learned from Israel (1Cor.10:11). If God blessed the Church in America to play a vital role in reaching the nations, and if (as shown earlier) we have spent, and continue to spend, the blessing on ourselves, then that is sin. And if judgment follows disobedience, then what might judgment (or discipline as might be the case with the Church) look like in America? Unlike Israel, America is not yet occupied by an enemy army (at least not in the natural realm). But America is now occupied in a life and death struggle with a number of potentially devastating threats; i.e. the breakdown of the family, the attack on the sanctity of human life, increasing secularism and moral relativism, unprecedented national debt, and the potential of increasing terrorist activity. If America is not

delivered from these threats, she will likely go the way of every other great nation in history.

2 Chronicles 7:13-14 speaks of the relationship between God's judgment and supernatural healing, "*If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.*"

Most Christians are familiar with 2 Chronicles 7:14. The part about God healing our land brings hope. But what about the part, "*and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways?*" If taking the Gospel to every nation is a priority to God, and if He has blessed us for that very purpose, but we have not followed through, then might there be a connection between our disobedience and many of the ills befalling our nation today?

Could it be that the Church in America is largely unaware of God's heart for every nation because we have focused more on being blessed than on the One who has blessed us? "*the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful*" (Matt. 13:22).

Could we become so consumed with our efforts to fix America's problems that we miss the fact that the Church worldwide is on the very threshold of fulfilling His passion for every nation?

Could it be if we who are called by His name here in America were moved by His heart for the nations and made His purpose our purpose, that God might supernaturally heal our land?

Could it be that many of the battles we are fighting here in America are actually diversionary tactics from the enemy to keep us and our resources from playing a strategic role in the final push to fulfill the Great Commission? After all, Satan

knows we could right every wrong in America, and still not see him cast into the pit. But when the Gospel is preached in all the world for a witness to all the nations, "*then the end shall come,*" Matthew 24:14.

Ministry or Missions; Unsaved or Unreached

The dictionary defines a mission as "a task or function assigned or undertaken." The Church today attaches the word "mission" to all kinds of outreach from feeding the homeless to witnessing at the mall. These ministries are important, and according to the dictionary it is not incorrect to call them missions.

However, I believe such a broad use of the term missions allows us to think that by doing such things we are effectively fulfilling the Great Commission, which may not be true.

The word "mission" is used only once in (and only in some versions of) the New Testament (Acts 12:25). Perhaps the best definition of the word is found, not in a single verse, but in the life of the one who many call the first missionary of the Church, the Apostle Paul. From Paul's writings it is clear that he understood God's desire to bless every nation (Rom.4:17-18, 16:26, Gal.3:8, 1 Tim.3:16). I believe that is why Paul wrote, "*It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known...*" (Rom.15:20 NIV).

Notice that Paul did not aspire to preach the Gospel where people had not yet received Christ, but rather where people had not yet heard the name of Christ. In the world today there are over 1.6 billion people who have never even heard of Jesus.¹¹ Most of them live in unreached people groups.

Missiologists use the term "unreached" to describe a people group among which there is no community of Christians capable of evangelizing their own people. Though they might be unsaved, most

people in America would not be considered unreached. There is probably a church available to them in their language. They could go to a Church if they chose to do so. In many places around the world people do not have that option.

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I often hear statements such as, "*You don't have to go to Africa to do missions,*" or "*My mission field is my workplace.*" In some cases those may be true statements. Before God led me into the truths I am sharing with you, I often made those same statements. But now, because of what I know about the nations and God's heart for the nations, I am compelled to distinguish between ministry and missions; between unsaved individuals and unreached people groups (nations). According to Matthew 24:14, we could win every person in America to Christ and still not finish the job.

Your Mission Within The Great Commission

I have met with more than a few people who think that to be truly involved in missions they've got to pack their bags. This kind of thinking may be noble, but it shows a lack of understanding about what it will really take to complete the Great Commission.

For every soldier on the field of battle there are dozens if not hundreds of support personnel in the rear lines and back home. To reach the nations for Christ, some will have to go, but we also need funders, intercessors, mobilizers, and equippers. We are not all called to be foreign missionaries, but we are all

called to missions. The Great Commission is for the whole Church, and we must each discover our mission within the Great Commission.

For most, what is needed is not so much a change of venue, but a change of heart. We each need to come humbly before our God, and to ask Him to open the “the eyes of our heart” (Eph.1:18) concerning His heart for every nation. If God alters your perception, your path will change. And most likely He will begin using you where you are, only differently than before.

For instance, if you work with young people, your focus might shift from developing good Christian kids to mobilizing an army of mission minded young people with a heart to complete the Great Commission. If you work or go to school with internationals, you might begin seeing them with a whole new potential and purpose. If you are in a prayer group, invite the group to engage in spiritual warfare through intercessory prayer on behalf of a different missionary or unreached people group each week. If God has given you a gift to make money, you might begin to see the folly of wasting it on things that will not last rather than investing it for an eternal return.

When the pulse of His heart becomes the pulse of our heart, it affects our giving, our praying, and our use of time. Ultimately it affects our life direction.

Let's Hasten His Return

In closing I would like to direct your attention to 2 Peter 3:9-13. “(v.9) *The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. (v.10) But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up. (v.11) Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of*

people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, (v.12) looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! (v.13) But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.”

The “promise” in verse 9 refers to the promised return of Christ. While the Bible does not reveal the exact time of His return, this scripture does tell us why He has not yet returned.

Have you ever been so repulsed by some story or event in the news that you have thought “*God, how can You allow this?*” Though God’s judgment of evil may not be immediate, it is certain. This passage tells us that God is delaying His final judgment of this world because He desires that “*none should perish!*” He hates evil, but His love for those who have yet to turn to Him is so great that He is willing to wait for them. Many have not yet turned to Him because they have not yet heard of Him. He is waiting, not only on those who will receive the Gospel, but also on those who will share it!

Do you look forward to the day when evil is vanquished and righteousness dwells in the earth? That day is coming. But as we have seen from Matthew 24:14, it will not come until the last unreached nation has been reached with the Gospel. And as we see from 2 Peter 3:9, it will not come until the last person for whom He is waiting has turned to Him. These two verses reveal the amazing breadth and depth of the Great Commission.

2 Peter 3:12 challenges us to be “*looking for and hastening the coming*” of that day. We do not hasten it in the sense that we can actually change the date. By His authority God has appointed such things (Acts 1:7). We do however have the privilege of participating in the hastening of that day if we so

choose. I believe we hasten the coming of that day by doing our part to complete the Great Commission. Do you want to hasten that day? What is He calling you to do?

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* Many in the Body of Christ believe that events of Matthew 24 were fulfilled in 70 AD. Matthew 24:14 is offered as a proof text in this paper not to take exception to this point of view, but rather because it is the verse that first drew the writer’s attention to the Biblical reality of God’s heart for every tongue, tribe and nation. There are numerous other passages in scripture that substantiate the precondition of reaching every nation in order to complete the Great Commission, and to fulfill the vision of worship such as it recorded in Revelation 7:9, (i.e.—Genesis 18:19 & 22:18, Matthew 28:19, Luke 24:47, Revelation 5:9 & 15:4, etc.)

¹ All scripture from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

² Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance, James Strong, S.T.D., LL.D., Abingdon Publishing, Nashville, 1978.

³ For current data on People Groups and Unreached People Groups, visit the Joshua Project at www.joshuaproject.net.

⁴ Mission Frontiers Bulletin of the U.S. Center for World Mission, January-February 1998, “There is No Greater Satisfaction” by John Piper

⁵ The Traveling Team website, www.thetravelingteam.org Resources > State of the World > Statistics > General Statistics, also <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/?q=node/191>

⁶ Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds., William Carey Library, Pasadena, CA, 1981. “The Long Look: Eras of Missions History,” pp. 167-177.

⁷ Run With The Vision, Bob Sjogren and Bill & Amy Stearns, Bethany House Publishers 1995, p. 16.

⁸ “The Unfinished Task - World Evangelization: A Year 2007 Overview” (PowerPoint), the Joshua Project, <http://www.joshuaproject.net/download.php#ppt> > Status of World Evangelization

⁹ “Where are We? - A Reflection on the Current Status of Reaching the Unreached” by Stan Parks (Power Point), the Joshua Project, also <http://www.joshuaproject.net/download.php>

¹⁰ “Growth of the Church” The Traveling Team, also <http://www.thetravelingteam.org/?q=node/192>

¹¹ 2007 Southern Baptist Convention, address by Jerry Rankin, President of the International Mission Board, <http://www.imb.org/main/news/details.asp?LanguageID=1709&StoryID=5769>

If you would like to know how to participate in the Great Commission through the ministry of Mars Hill, please contact us at 281-403-1463, email us at webmaster@mars-hill.org, or visit our website at www.mars-hill.org.