

The Great Commission: What Is It and To Whom Was It Given?

By Pastor Steve Bates

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. Matthew 28:19, 20

This often quoted passage from the book of Matthew has come to be known by most believers as the “Great Commission” passage. It is a foundational verse from which most churches, ministries, and even individual believers derive their purpose. This author agrees that Matthew 28 in addition to several other passages of Scripture do communicate to the Bible reader a commission from Christ. However, this author believes that the question that needs to be discerned is, “*What is the commission, and to whom is this commission given?*” The purpose of this article is to allow the Scriptures to answer the above questions.

A Biblical teaching that seems to be ignored by nearly all of the “Bible scholars,”¹ Bible professors, religious leaders, and sadly, even many independent Baptist Pastors and their congregations is the teaching found throughout Scripture that the *local church alone* is the recipient of the “Great Commission” as found in Matthew 28:16-20 and elsewhere.

Many within fundamental Baptist circles *say* they believe the above teaching, however the unfortunate reality is that their actions speak louder than their words. These churches’ actions are inconsistent with what they say they believe in this regard.

The Issue of Authority

The word “authority” is a disliked word by many “individuals” in this 21st century. The unfortunate reality is that this often times includes many within Christianity as well. It is this disdain for authority that is creating many of today's problems both secular and religious.

Baptists, once strong on *local church authority*, have weakened their stand on the subject of local church authority **alone** to carry out the commission of Christ, and sound frightfully closer to those in the tradition of Protestantism than in the historic faith of Baptists. One undeniable fact concerning the commission of Christ is that He gave *someone* the authority and responsibility to

¹ This author has placed quotation marks around the words, *Bible scholars*, simply because often those men or women referred to by pastors, teachers, and many others in Christendom are in reality NOT biblical scholars. For an excellent article written on the subject of biblical scholarship see: Aaron Strouse, “What is Biblical Scholarship?” (Newington, CT: Emmanuel Baptist Theological Journal, Fall 2005) a publication of Emmanuel Baptist Theological Seminary which a ministry of Emmanuel Baptist Church of Newington, CT. This author believe’s the reader can reach the Seminary on the web at www.emmanuel-newington.org and request a copy.

carry out His commission. The only question is *to whom* this commission and authority was given. Thus, this author wants to examine the above question honestly from the Scriptures.

There are only three possible recipients of this commission. Either it was given to 1) believers individually; 2) the apostles as such; or 3) it was given to that assembly of believers our Lord called together during His public ministry which is identified clearly by Him as His church three different times in Matthew.

Let the reader consider *first*, **believers individually**. If it was given to the individual believer then it carries no authority, contrary to the example set by John the Baptist and Jesus. For if every believer is free to “go” (evangelize), “baptize” (ordinance of the local church), and “teach” (regardless of his identity or belief), then believers are left with absolutely no guidelines for truth. It is foolish to believe that the “all things” of Scripture would be clearly taught if each believer is to be left to his every whim in the matter. The mass confusion of Protestantism is evidence enough of this faulty thinking.² **Churches have not always been right in their understanding of the Scriptures, but history will witness that congregational study has been far more safe than the edicts handed down to congregations by self-imposed interpreters of the Word of God.** Our Lord was well aware of this when He placed authority for teaching in the hands of the local church. Paul spoke of “another Jesus, another spirit, and another gospel” that some individuals would try to subtly force upon NT churches, and yet, he still told the Corinthian assembly that they were to discern these men, and not follow their false teaching (II Cor. 11:1-4).

Secondly, let the reader consider if the commission was given to the **apostolic office**. If, in fact, the commission was given to the apostolic office, as some have suggested, then it died with that generation for they had no successors. The qualifications for one to be considered an “apostle” prevented the possibilities of these apostles having successors. This is clear from Acts 1:21,22. While choosing a man as an apostle to take Judas’ place it was clearly indicated that the individual must have been a witness of the Lord’s resurrection, that is, he must have seen the Lord after His resurrection. It was this condition that caused Paul to say that as an apostle he was “one born out of due time,” in I Corinthians 15:8. Paul had not seen the Lord after His resurrection until He was miraculously revealed to him in his experience of conversion. The apostles were especially chosen for a period before the NT Scriptures were written, and they spoke and wrote as men especially inspired of God.

Now *thirdly*, let the reader consider, that the above leaves only one logical and Scriptural recipient of the Commission of Christ: It was given to that **assembly of believers** which the Lord called “My church” during His public ministry. The commission of Christ was delivered on three different occasions, each at a different location. The first, on the day of the Lord’s resurrection, in the city of Jerusalem, and is recorded in Luke 24. (Mark’s account, Mark 16:15, seems to be the same time and

² This is a day of *religious confusion* in Christendom. Whether it is more today than days gone by, one can only debate; but that religious confusion reigns today is beyond debate. *All sorts of religions and religious beliefs claim to be the truth.* Believers of every stripe and kind dot the landscape of this great country and world.

place.) The second was some time later, in Galilee, and is recorded in Matthew 28, and is also referred to by Mark. The final delivery was on the Mount of Olives, and took place at the Lord's ascension, in Acts 1. On each of these separate occasions the Lord's assembly, His company of believers, were present.

This author will now examine the three separate occasions of the giving of Christ's commission to His assembly. In **Luke 24**, the women from Galilee had come to the sepulchre to anoint the body of Jesus. After discovering that the body of Jesus was missing, the women were "perplexed." Luke records that two angels appeared to these women and told them that "he is not here, but is risen." Upon hearing of the news of His resurrection, Luke states (v. 9), that they "returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things to the eleven, **and to all the rest**" (emphasis mine), making it abundantly clear that there was in Jerusalem a *group* of disciples at that time that included *more* than just the apostles. However, on the very same day, recorded later in the same chapter of Luke, Jesus "drew near" unto two men who were walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. After some time of discourse with Him, finally "their eyes were opened, and they knew him." Upon this revelation, v.33 states that they "rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, **and them that were with them.**" Again, here is a group of believers gathered together as an assembly with the apostles in their midst. It is clear from the Scriptures that the apostles did not assemble by themselves. The reader should again note that the two men that were on the road to Emmaus knew of their meeting place and knew right where to find this assembly of believers. One must understand that it was to *this very group of believers* meeting with the apostles that Jesus appeared in v. 36, and subsequently delivered again His commission in vv. 46-48. Remember also, it was this assembly whom Peter addressed between the ascension of the Lord and that first Pentecost. Peter said, under inspiration, that this assembly originated from the baptism of John the Baptist (1:22) and, "accompanied" with the Lord during His public ministry. The reader should understand this: if the Lord did not address His commission to His church(assembly)³

³ To understand the English word "church," one must understand the Greek word underlying it. It is a combination of two Greek words: ek (Ek) meaning "out" and kalew (Kaleo) meaning "to call" which is the verb form. When the two words are combined and used as a noun it takes on the meaning of a "called out assembly." Thus, the Greek language always viewed this word *ekklēsia* (Ekklesia) to mean an assembly of people who are called out for a purpose. B. H. Carroll brings this out while commenting on *ekklesia* as he states in his book (*Ecclesia – The Church* Little Rock: Challenge Press, n.d., pp. 8, 22), "What, then, etymologically, is the meaning of this word? Its primary meaning is: An organized assembly whose members have been properly called out from private homes or business to attend to public affairs. This definition necessarily implies prescribed conditions of membership...Locality inheres in Ecclesia. There can be no assembly now or hereafter without a place to meet."

Classical Greek writers defined *ekklesia* as assembly or congregation. Roy Mason states the following in his book (*The Church That Jesus Built* Clarksville, TN: Baptist Bible Church Publications, 1977, p. 28.) concerning the classical usage of *ekklesia*: "What, then, let us ask, did the word mean as understood by the people of that day?...Both with the Greeks and the Jews, the word denoted an assembly of the people... Among the Greeks *ecclesia* was the assembly of the citizens of a free city-state gathered by a herald blowing a horn through the streets of a town...It was the organized assembly of the authorized voters of the local community met to transact business of a common concern. It corresponded to the town meeting of New England of later days. No better place in Scripture is the Greek concept of *ekklesia* more clearly illustrated than in Acts 19:21ff. This passage records that the Ephesian citizens were assembled together (v. 25) to discuss what they were to do about the economic problems that were arising from the apostle Paul's preaching. The

on this occasion then there is not a true church in the NT. Even John's brief account of this event, John 20:19-21, agrees with this, stating that “the disciples were assembled,” and what Jesus delivered on this occasion, He delivered it to the assembly.

The second time that the commission is spoken to the Lord's disciples is found in Matthew's account of those events following the Lord's resurrection, chapter 28. The women who came to anoint the body of our Lord were told by the angel at the sepulchre to “go quickly, and tell his **disciples**. . . he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him. . . and they departed. . . and did run to bring his **disciples** word,” Matthew 28:7, 8. Though the eleven were no doubt included among the disciples here, they are not mentioned, and the command to meet Jesus in Galilee was to the whole company of disciples and in no way, limited to the eleven. For one to say that this was a call for the eleven is to pre-suppose that supposition upon the text. On their way to break the news to the group of disciples they met Jesus Himself, and He repeats the angelic instruction to meet Him in Galilee, saying, “Go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me.” Again they are instructed to tell the brethren to go to Galilee, and the instruction is in no way limited to the eleven apostles. Matthew 28:16 states that the eleven went to Galilee, but there is no indication from the text that they were there with the Lord alone. In fact, the angel at the sepulchre, and Jesus Himself had sent word to tell the disciples and the brethren to be there, and the language of the text strongly indicates that they were present in sizeable number. This author has reached this conclusion because Matthew 28:17 states, “And when they saw him, they worshiped him: but *some doubted*.” (Emphasis mine). This author believes that it seems to be more than the eleven present, because it would be

Bible reader should note that this group is called an assembly (*ekklesia*) in verses 32,41. However, as this meeting progressed, it soon became an “uproar” (v. 40). It began to turn ugly. The townclerk had to step in and appease these Ephesian citizens. He told them that the situation had to be dealt with lawfully and orderly by a “lawful assembly” (v. 39). One can see then, from this passage, the mindset of the first century Greek concerning an *ekklesia*.”

In writing about this civil assembly (Acts 19), Thomas Strouse makes several observations in his book (*I Will Build My Church: The Doctrine And History Of Baptists* Virginia Beach: Tabernacle Baptist Theological Press, 2nd ed. 1998, p. 24.) “1) The citizens were summoned from their homes for the purpose to assemble. 2) They had a definite and common purpose to accomplish collectively. 3) Only the citizens of Ephesus had the privilege to assemble and deal with the issue at hand. The basic concept behind the secular usage of *ekklesia* in the first century is referring to those called out with the purpose of assembling.”

Ekklesia is consistently found to mean a group of individuals called out from someplace for the purpose of assembling together. Since this is the case, the question should be asked, “Did Jesus deliberately use *ekklesia* with the intention of expressing the **established** concept of a *visible assembly which assembled for a specific purpose* as the basis for His *NEW* institution from which He would work? This author believes the answer is most assuredly, Yes! There are several reasons that substantiate this belief. First, *ekklesia* was not the only word used by the Greeks to refer to an assembly. Christ could have employed the Greek word *panhgurij* (translated “general assembly” in Heb. 12:23), but He did not. Secondly, there also was a word to describe an assembly of His followers without limitations (*sunagwgh* or synagogue), but He did not use this word either. Thirdly, as I. K. Cross puts it in his book, (*The Church: Local or Invisible*) “Jesus did not use the term [*ekklesia*] to bring about a change in its meaning but *because* of its meaning, which was well established in the minds of the people. The only difference in the ‘*ekklesia*’ our Lord was to call out and those that had been called out by others was that this was to be His assembly and therefore the qualifications of its membership would be determined by Him.”

strange that any of the eleven doubted at this time, for each of them had all of their doubts removed in the Jerusalem meeting including doubting Thomas (John 20:26-28). It seems quite clear to this author, therefore, that the assembly to whom Jesus was about to commission in Galilee had increased to include many who were seeing the Lord after His resurrection for the first time.⁴ This commission therefore is a LOCAL CHURCH COMMISSION, and in no way can it be interpreted as an apostolic commission, or having been addressed to the individuals alone.

Our Lord's final delivery of the commission is recorded in Acts 1, and takes place on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem. The Scripture states that Jesus, "being assembled together with them," (v. 4), gave the assembly instructions concerning the interim between His leaving and the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit. Following this instruction Jesus again addresses the commission to them. The group was told to tarry in Jerusalem, (v. 4) which they did, (v. 12). It is true that the record states that the apostles were present, as on other occasions when the church met, but again as on other occasions they were meeting WITH the church, they were not alone. Then Peter addressed the group that returned to Jerusalem after receiving the commission (v. 15), and they are numbered at "about an hundred and twenty." To this assembly He gave the promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Acts 1:5. To this assembly the angels gave the promise of the Lord's return, Acts 1:11. To this assembly, under the charge of prophecy, elected Judas' successor to the apostleship, Acts 1:20-26. This company is designated as having originated with John's baptism and functioned as a company throughout the Lord's public ministry, Acts 1:21, 22. This assembly received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost according to promise, Acts 2:1,2. It was to THIS assembly that the 3,000 converts were added on that day, Acts 2:41. This assembly continued to grow and is, consistently known as, a church throughout the book of Acts. It was to THIS assembly that the final commission was delivered, Acts 1:8. The commission was the last words uttered by the Lord upon this earth. If the commission had been an apostolic matter surely He would have made that clear on this occasion. Instead He delivered this final instruction and command to that "called out" assembly, His church, as on all other occasions. The *Great Commission* is a CHURCH commission, and *any other seeking to function under its authority is usurping what was never delivered to them.*

THE COMMISSION AND AUTHORITY

Now, for the real purpose of this article. The reader must grasp that there is a **great difference between privilege and authority**. While there are many privileges granted to all believers, AUTHORITY to carry out the will of the Lord on the earth is clearly placed in the hands of His

⁴ In I Corinthians 15, the Bible reader will read of Paul's explanation of those that were eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ. He then states in v.6 that "he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once." It seems that because of the order in which Paul explains the eyewitness accounts that this Galilee meeting was "above five hundred." It does not seem likely that there was another meeting at which such a large group assembled. In Jerusalem the company was limited in assembly for fear of the Jews. Bear in mind that word had been passed along to the brethren that Jesus was going to make an important appearance in Galilee, and they were to be there. Keep also in mind that Jesus' ministry had been largely in the Galilee area, and therefore many of His disciples lived in that area. This would account for a large gathering there, many of whom were seeing the Lord for the first time after His resurrection, and hence the doubts of some of them. All evidence points to the fact that when the *Great Commission* was given perhaps in the clearest of terms that it was delivered in Galilee, rather than in a closed meeting with only the apostles.

churches. This author wants to examine the extent of authority as defined by the Lord's commission to His churches. The *Great Commission*, as given to the Lord's churches, is really a commission to evangelize, but the NT concept of evangelization is *far more inclusive than simply getting people saved*. In Matthew's account, where the commission is most completely spelled out, the original command is to "make disciples of all nations." It is NOT ENOUGH to simply get a "profession of faith." One should not be misled to think that "making a convert" is necessarily the same as to have made a disciple. There are many people in churches today who are not disciples of the Lord. A disciple is a learner. It must be understood that the commission is to be carried out in its entirety if one is to be "made a disciple. The order stated is not to make disciples and baptize them and teach them with an option to leave the latter part of the commission to someone else. The order is to "disciple," BY "baptizing" and "teaching." In other words, a disciple is made of a believer by baptizing and teaching him/her the "all things" of Scripture. This is full NT evangelism as set forth to the churches. This also is the testimony of the Scriptures.

The practical application of Christ's commission was not a foreign concept to His *ekklesia*. Christ's commission was also the thrust of His earthly ministry, which was made possible by His shed blood. He commissioned His *ekklesia* to follow His example of "going, making disciples, baptizing them, and instructing them." Thus, His commission to His *ekklesia* was to duplicate His efforts by establishing other local, NT, immersionist assemblies. The practical question arises, "Is this the interpretation of His commission by His *ekklesia*?" The clear and unequivocal answer is in the affirmative. That this is the biblical interpretation of the "Great Commission" is validated through the undeniable application of His *ekklesia*, recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, and the consistent testimony of the entire NT. Strouse makes this same point as he writes,

"This obedience is manifested throughout the Book of Acts. For instance, Peter preached to unsaved Jews and those who responded were baptized and added to the *ekklesia* that Christ started (Acts 2:37-47). After Saul of Tarsus' conversion, he was baptized at Damascus and served there until he left for Jerusalem (9:6, 18-26). Cornelius and his household received the Gospel and were saved and baptized at Caesarea (10:1 ff; especially vv. 44-47 and 11:14-17). Paul's three missionary journeys are replete with examples of discipling, baptizing, and instructing Gentiles, forming Gentile churches to which he wrote his Epistles to the Galatians, Thessalonians, Corinthians, Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and the members thereof, such as Philemon, Timothy and Titus (Acts 13-19)."⁵

Thus, knowing the commission of Christ, as well as, the application of the churches found throughout the book of Acts, one must conclude that the three participles ("going, baptizing, teaching") and the imperative to ("make disciples") are Christ's instructions on *how* to fulfill the commission of Matt. 28:19,20.

For nearly two millennia the local church has been the depository of the truth. It has been and still

⁵ Thomas Strouse, *I Will Build My Church*, p. 32.

is the responsibility of local NT churches to be obedient to Christ's commission. Each body of Christ has been commanded to "go" according to the geographical outline given in Acts 1:8. No doubt, every church member is to "go." All are commanded to "go" locally (Jerusalem). Some are called to "go" beyond the local geographical outline of their community (Acts 13:1-3) to plant NT churches wherein the Great Commission will be obediently followed in that locale. Every church member has the responsibility to be a soulwinner in a effort to "make disciples." Upon "making these new converts" they are to be immersed into a local church (Acts 2:41, 47). They are then to be taught the Word of God (Matt. 28:20; Eph. 4:11), within the context of the local church. So that, these new converts will grow and mature to the point that they themselves become "skillful in the word of righteousness" (Heb. 5:11-14). Thus, being able to fulfill the commission of Christ themselves.

Getting back to the subject of authority. What authority did men like Paul and Barnabas have to preach the gospel, baptize the believers, and then teach these new converts the "all things" of Scripture? This author has already established the fact that the commission was delivered exclusively to the local church. But then in Acts 13:46, 47 the Bible reader finds Paul and Barnabas stating boldly to the Jews in their synagogue at Antioch (Pisidia) that, "It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing that ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light to the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth." This author asks, by what authority had these men preached the gospel "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek"? It should be noted that Paul and Barnabas were church members in the Antioch church.⁶ As the members of this local church "ministered to the Lord, and fasted" within this local church, the Holy Ghost called two of these church members to "go." The Bible reader should note that when the Antioch church "fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, **they** [the Antioch church] sent them away." The next verse (13:4) then states, "So they [Paul and Barnabas], being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed..." The Bible reader should ask, "Which is it? Did the Antioch church send them or did the Holy Ghost send them?" The answer is both! The Holy Ghost is seen working through the Antioch church. This is the biblical pattern of the entire NT. This is perfectly consistent with Christ commissioning His *ekklesia* to carry out the Great Commission. That this is true is evidenced in Acts 13: 1-4. These two missionaries/church planters fully recognized the *authority* of the congregation at Antioch. They were sent out by this local church, and they reported back to them their accomplishments, Acts 14:26, 27.

One more thing for the reader to consider is that the biblical fact of *church-authority necessary for the discipling* of the nations carries with it *church authority in baptism* as a part of the discipling process, and none who refuse to recognize this authority have any Biblical right to tamper with this sacred ordinance. Nowhere in the NT will the reader find a commission to baptize given to anyone, save those to whom it was delivered in the original commission, one of the Lord's local churches. Neither can there be found in the NT after the giving of the commission a single case where baptism

⁶ This Antioch church was established as a result of the Jerusalem church's obedience to the Great Commission of church planting by "going, making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them" (Acts 8:1; 11:19).

was administered without church authority.⁷ Any practice other than this must therefore rest upon assumption or usurpation. This same principle must of necessity hold true in the teaching aspect of discipleship. Who can obey the words of Jesus to “teach them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you,” other than those who accept and observe those teachings themselves? Again, no group sidestepping any NT teaching can rightly call itself a NT church, or be qualified to teach the “all things” of Scripture. It therefore follows that authority for teaching the observance of all things the Lord commanded is placed upon the shoulders of His churches, which He commissioned to the task before leaving the one (church in Jerusalem) He called out to assemble to begin this great task. Church authority is very real, and not to be ignored.

THE COMMISSION AND RESPONSIBILITY

What all church members must realize is that authority is not a privilege and honour alone... It is a heavy RESPONSIBILITY. The Lord’s churches are not privileged institutions which may stroll through the earth like some ecclesiastical prima donnas. Rather, the Lord’s churches have an awesome responsibility. They are responsible for the preaching of the gospel to every creature. They are responsible to see that converts to Christ understand the importance of baptism. They are responsible to see that the Scriptures are fully taught in their proper balance, so that everything receives proper emphasis, and that no theology is taught to the exclusion of another (I Tim. 5:21; II Tim. 4:2; Acts 20:27). This means that a biblical NT church must be constantly aware, as to whether it is accepting and practicing the “all things” of Scripture. Let the reader also remember, it is only to the congregations faithfully fulfilling their responsibility of Christ’s commission, as they are led by the Holy Spirit, that our Lord promised: “...And, lo, I am with you [**obedient churches**] alway, even unto the end of the age.” (Emphasis mine) Authority cannot be ignored, and responsibility must constantly be recognized knowing that the day of accounting is coming.

May Bible Baptist Church of Nashua, NH be found faithful in that day!

⁷ Everyone always wants to point to Acts 8 and claim that Phillip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch without church authority. Again, that is forcing one’s biased opinion upon this factual account. There is no reason to not believe Phillip was sent out under the authority of the Jerusalem church as a result of the “great persecution” (8:1). The consistent pattern found in the NT was such and there is nothing in the text that would lead one to conclude that he was not acting under local church authority.