



CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

God's Story: The First Great Commission

INTRODUCTION

“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 commanded you.” The words are familiar and vital to the church’s self-understanding. With these final words in the Gospel of Matthew, the resurrected Christ directs the focus and work of his disciples. At Jesus’s direction, the church is to live with a missionary attitude, seeking always to extend the kingdom of God by using baptism and comprehensive teaching to make disciples of all people. These words are so essential that most Christians have them memorized, and virtually all Christians know that they have their own name. We call these verses the Great Commission. These parting words of our Lord provide the only mission statement that the church needs.

What stands out to you about the words of the Great Commission? How do these verses serve as a “mission statement” to direct a church’s priorities and focus?

Significant as the Great Commission is for the church’s life and work, it is helpful to know exactly what the words mean. Often, in our usage, the phrase, “great commission” functions merely as a label, and we forget it is actually a definition. A commission is “an instruction, command, or duty given to a person or group of people.” That this commission is “great” indicates that these words of instruction are of singular importance. They mark out the work that we should be doing as Christ’s church. What Jesus told his disciples at his ascension is indeed a great commission, but it is not the only commission recorded in Holy Scripture. Indeed, it is not even the only great commission found in the Bible.

Already in the first chapter of Genesis, before the world is yet a week old, an explicit and important commission is given from God the Creator to man, the chief steward

of God’s creation. “God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gn1:28). The words are direct and explicit and certainly fulfill the definition of a commission, and this commission carries with it a sweeping and lasting significance—it is the point of man, the reason for his creation. It is indeed a great commission; it is the first Great Commission.

Before we explore the implications and applications of this fundamental commission for understanding ourselves as disciples of our Lord, it is worth noting the importance of this commission is for man’s understanding of his existence. There comes a time when we begin to ask the “big” questions. What am I doing here? What does it mean to be me? What is the point of it all? What does it mean to exist? These fundamental questions need answers if one is to make sense of life and the business of living. Oddly, the more knowledge and mastery we gain, the less we are able to provide compelling answers to these questions. It is common for people to press through life, busy with activities, yet without any real sense of the meaning behind it all.

Q & A

The first Great Commission spells out the answers to the big questions. It tells us why we exist, what we are to be busy doing, and it reveals the key to the meaning of life. It is a truly great commission.

Read Genesis 1 and then consider the following questions in light of the account of creation.

- 1 One aspect of the narrative of creation from Genesis 1 is the deliberate action of the Creator and the rhythm of the work of creation. How does the text establish a meter and rhythm? What patterns do you see in the text?
- 2 As the days of creation progress, so does the complexity and quantity of what is created. There is also increasing divine approval. How does the text convey a sense of purposefulness and approval for each element of God's creation?
- 3 How would you explain what is happening in verse 22? Why isn't there a parallel word given to the land animals? Describe how, in a sense, every part of the creation—even the land itself—has a "commission" from God.
- 4 Read Psalm 148. How does this psalm mirror Genesis 1? How, exactly, do the sun, moon, stars, snow, wind, hills, and trees praise the Lord?
- 5 Finally, we arrive at the creation of man in verse 26. What are the two main ideas that emerge regarding man? What is the connection between these two critical points of the text?
- 6 In verse 28, God reinforces the purpose of man's creation when he spells out his directive to his new creatures. What do you think—how much does the first part of the first Great Commission still apply to us, the descendants of Adam and Eve?
- 7 Should we understand the commission of verse 28 to be universal and enduring? What reasons might someone give to argue that this applies only to those who first heard it?
- 8 What did it look like for Adam and Eve to "rule over" the fish, birds, and beasts? What does it look like for us?
- 9 How should Christians think about and respond to calls for us to "love mother earth" or encouragements to "hug a tree"?
- 10 How does the first Great Commission provide a compelling answer to the "big questions" about existence and meaning in life? What difference will this first great commission make for the way that you live?

PRAYER

Offer thanks to the wise Creator for putting you in the midst of an amazing creation and for giving you a purpose in relation to that creation. Ask for God to guide you with his Spirit that you learn to see how every part of your life can be lived in fulfillment of the first Great Commission.