

Approaches to a Great Commission Church

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Introduction:

As a person who grew up around the Gulf of Mexico and lots of lakes, I enjoy being around the water, whether on the beach, swimming, or some form of boating, but not sailboats. However I watched with great interest the sailing competition, The Americas Cup in 1987. In the finals it was the American boat, ***Stars and Stripes*** against the Australian defender ***Kookaburra III***. The competition was fierce and the TV coverage was widespread. I learned a great deal about the boats themselves, the crew, the strategies involved and the impact of windspeeds on the various types of boats.

Part of the racing involved having windspeeds high enough to move the crews and boats through the waters. With the massive sails, winds were essential to racing. Without the winds, the boats would just drift in the ocean. I believe there is a parallel to church life. Without an active engagement with the Great Commission, churches just drift through their existence and only end up where the currents of the times take them. The Great Commission puts wind in the sails and moves the boat in a positive and consistent direction toward the expansion of God's glory. Leaders of local churches have to do is to make sure they put enough pressure, winds, into the sails of the church to move and keep the church on course with the design of God.

In many regards, the Christian church as a whole in America is adrift. There are many reasons, consequences and manifestations of this in our churches and country. The typical American church lacks both a course and the winds for the sails to help them move toward their destination. This problem is becoming more evident, but has been somewhat covered up with the increase in the life expectancy of Americans. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the senior saints who have paved the way, but with their increased years, the church in America has been able to maintain some level of status quo without reproducing itself both in numbers of churches and numbers of new followers of Christ.

However, with increased pressures brought about through difficult economic times in the US, the church has less financial and human resources to engage in the advancing ministries of His Kingdom. The pressures did not create the challenges the church is facing, just exposed what has been there for some years. These problems could be seen more easily in the decline of mainline churches in the 1960s and 70s. However, those declines have now begun to impact the Southern Baptist Convention churches. The vast majority of churches are experiencing challenges with attendance, with baptizing new first time converts, especially adults, with finances, and with growing people spiritually into the life and culture changing character of Christ. The American church, including the SBC, is in many ways moving, but it may just be adrift instead of purposefully advancing God's agenda. And people are beginning to ask questions. I trust they will be good ones, not just survival questions, but that is for another time.

No one book or chapter can provide easy and workable answers to the complex challenges facing churches across the country. In this particular chapter, I will seek to write my perspective on various approaches to the Great Commission. At points I will simply be offering my perspective

on what I see without much opinion. At other points I will be offering my opinion on what could or should be and at times I will blur the two. I trust you will find some nuggets along the way.

Current Context:

In 1992 I completed a year-long research and writing project for my dissertation for my PhD at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Having been both a student and a professor in doctoral studies, I have come to believe that a requirement for getting a doctorate is to have a title that is long and one that confuses most people. My title was “The Purpose Driven Church: An Investigation into Developing and Implementing a Purpose Statement and Its Benefits to Church Growth.”

Most dissertations are not exactly the most exciting documents to read, so let me summarize for you the gist of the research. The research showed there is a strong positive correlation between church leaders and members both knowing and operating by its purpose statement and the advancement and health of the church. In other words, churches do better when they have a clear understanding of why they exist and act on it intentionally.

A professor colleague once noted that he believed that every organization should go out of business every ten years and then reexamine why they existed and then restart with a clear purpose and use the resources they have to accomplish their purpose. While this suggestion is not practical, it gets at the heart of the issue. Over time churches forget why they exist and lose focus on the essentials of being a body of kingdom people who are sent by God to expand His glory by sharing what they have been entrusted to a world that God desperately loves. From my dissertation and personal observations, churches who know and operate by the Great Commission tend to do better toward the Great Commission.

The tragedy of many individuals, churches, mission agencies, and denominations is that while they got started toward a worthy target and mission, with time they have largely forgotten why they exist and begin to more naturally serve their own needs and forget they even have a God-given target. The reality is, that if you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time.

Churches are struggling to help their members live out the values and morals of Christ and thereby be distinct from those who don't know Christ. Many churches are also struggling financially with the current economic declines. As a result, some Christians are taking a fresh examination of the church in America as a whole including Southern Baptist churches. A growing number of people are beginning to examine the church and their support of parachurch organizations in the SBC with a more critical eye. They are asking questions around what is our business and how is business. They are asking questions of purpose and effectiveness in achieving the purpose in light of the declines in areas such as attendance, baptisms, and financial resources. They are asking these at the local church level and also of the various supporting organizations that play a role in helping churches carrying out their purposes both in North America and around the world. Some in the SBC are looking for a resurgence of the Great Commission as a priority.

What is the Great Commission:

While this chapter will review the approaches to the Great Commission, I must confess that I believe that unless a church or a denominational agency has a clear sense of purpose and makes decisions consistent with that purpose in its daily tasks, the approach will not matter. Implied in my statement is a clear understanding of the biblical purpose of a local church and in this particular book, a biblical understanding of the Great Commission.

My preaching professor said that words do not have meanings, they have usages. While there may be some commonly held characteristics of views and beliefs around the Great Commission, I do not operate under a false allusion that everyone uses the term in the same manner or approaches the Great Commission in the same manner.

In short, the imperative of the Great Commission is to make disciples of all the peoples of the world. This certainly would involve doing this with intentionality and doing this as we go through life. It involves both sharing the greatest news of Christ's plan of salvation and teaching them to obey the commands of God as found in the Bible including the teachings of Christ through His life and ministry. Ideally, sharing involves a verbal witness supported or validated by a life that is actively following the teaching and commands of Jesus.

Our understanding of the Great Commission will directly and dramatically impact our approaches to carry it out. So, if we do not have a Biblical understanding, we will err in our approaches, in spite of any good intentions. If we do not have a solid understanding, we will substitute mileposts or short-term indicators as the final targets. We will examine some of those partial applications of the Great Commission in the following paragraphs.

Mixed Up Approaches Based on Partial Understanding of GC:

While carrying out the making of more disciples and teaching of new converts to grow in knowledge of and obedience to Christ, the Great Commission can be carried out in some partial ways. These partial ways are not wrong, but they do not fully contain the calling and task of the Great Commission. Christian leaders can run into difficulty if they unknowingly communicate the Great Commission is one of the following as the whole.

Here are some of the ways that we can misevaluate the Great Commission.

- Baptisms
- Evangelistic events
- Attendance
- Giving
- Teaching events
- Telling gospel

Some churches measure their effectiveness and success by how many people they baptize. Each baptism is very significant and collectively is a factor we should examine. While this is important, it is not the whole of making disciples. The danger in this approach is the birthing of spiritual orphans who do not learn to obey and follow Christ. Doing this makes it very difficult to carry out evangelism in the future as (1) it typically leaves the new convert without much

practical and seen life-change which does not endear them to share their new faith and (2) it leaves those without Christ who are connected to them a poor example of a new life in Christ. Research has also concluded that between 2/3 and 3/4 of all adult baptisms are for adults who are not professing Christ for the first time. So, we can believe we are doing better in reaching into the culture without Christ than we actually are.

Making disciples involves more than just conducting evangelistic events, whether they be VBS, revivals, seasonal musicals, seeker services, or even door-to-door visitation. While we are called to be faithful, we also want to examine the quantity and quality of fruit that is being produced. We do not need to buy into the belief that because we have acted in an evangelistic manner, we have completed the Great Commission or even effective in one aspect of it.

With some level of kidding, but also some level of truth, Baptists are accused of being concerned with three Bs, buildings, budgets and baptisms. While attendance at our services and training is important, just because a person has come into our church building does not mean we have been fruitful or even helpful in the process of disciple making. Too many have come to falsely identify success as “getting as many people as possible to stop whatever they are doing, and come and do whatever it is we are doing.”

Churches in America have often bought into the western education approach to disciple making, where there is a teacher who teaches and a student who learns by listening. This approach has its place in terms of information, but it is a limited and might I say a lousy way to think about the process of making disciples. We tend to think about getting them there and what we are going to tell them, but not as much about how people actually grow spiritually. If we are trying only to give academic tests this approach would be fine. However, if we are trying to help people grow in the image of Christ, we will have to ask some additional questions. Among others, some of those might include: what are the marks of a disciple and how to you make one of those?, how are perspectives and values shaped to reflect the heart and commands of God?, how do we help people not just get the right information, but how do we help them develop deep character that will act to please God even in hard things? How do we train people to be loving and sacrificial and not just consumers of Christianity?, What are we really calling members and non-Christians to do?.

Budgets and giving reflect something of the priorities of the church and something of the level of commitment to the Great Commission, individually and cooperatively. For some, they believe that because they have given financially to their local church, they have and are fulfilling the Great Commission. That somehow, someone will do Great Commission works. Likewise, a church can falsely believe that because their church is participating financially in mission efforts either locally or through the Cooperative Program of the SBC, that they have fulfilled their responsibilities toward the Great Commission. While these are significant, they too are only part of the puzzle.

Southern Baptists have typically carried out mission efforts in a cooperative manner through the Cooperative Program. Because individualism is on steroids in the US with the impact of postmodernism and the media, more churches will be tempted to pull back their funds from the Cooperative Program, thinking they as individual churches can better use the resources in

carrying out the Great Commission. This will have significant consequences, many of which might actually be detrimental to the overall task. Individual church members struggle with this as well with their tithes and offerings. They may just come to believe that they know best how to use their giving toward the Great Commission, which may or may not include giving to infrastructure or matters which they believe do not directly relate to the Great Commission, which could even include a nursery. No church leader(s) would want to plan around everyone giving in a designated way as they personally thought best.

We do live in an age where the world is smaller and more accessible to churches and individuals. But it is also true that the world is more complex in its nature and sub-parts than ever before. However, there is work that can be done together better than it can be done separately or individually. The Great Commission approach should include by individual parts and our cooperative efforts. No one person, church, or even denomination can complete the Great Commission by themselves. To believe otherwise would be a great act of arrogance toward God and the task before us.

Great Commandment and Great Commission Connection:

Men are known in some circles as the gender that can more easily compartmentalize. At points this serves them well, such as their ability to focus on hunting for food, when men hunted for food. At other points, the ability of men to compartmentalize, does not serve them well. This is true for denominations and individual churches as well.

Some see their primarily responsibility as to just love God in personal worship as if the needs and spiritual condition of others is of little concern. Others see their purpose and calling to address the social needs of societies and individuals. Still others concern themselves with the evangelism side of the Great Commission with little regard, unintentionally of course, with the Great Commandment or discipling toward obedience. Each group or person claiming the high road and a biblical basis for their views and actions.

So what is a denomination, church or individual follower of Christ to do? I would propose that we should live out of the perspective of the Great Commission as a natural and priority overflow of a high obedience to the Great Commandment. It is not enough to just love God. It is not enough to just love people through meeting human needs. It is not enough to just tell people about Jesus or to help them learn to obey Him. The commands demand that we obey **and** live them both.

Great Commission activities done without a deep love for God and love for people will be shallow at best and short-lived as well. The Great Commandment done without a love that drives us to address the eternal spiritual needs of people is not complete love. It is absolutely imperative that we reconnect the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, regardless of personal preferences or strengths.

Please allow me a few words for hyperbole. Much evangelism in America today focuses on motivating Christians who may not be experiencing or expressing the love of God to share Him. As leaders, we may be trying to get people who are not experiencing the benefits of a life lived

with Jesus to share with a lost, hostile and spiritually confused world how much Jesus loves them. It appears the American form of Christianity is focused on what God can do for us, not how we can labor and sacrifice to serve His purposes. We have American Christians who live in a pluralistic world that are confused spiritually about who God really is and then we as church and denominational leaders are asking them to face the attack of the world and to attack the gates of hell with the gospel they are not currently experiencing on a daily basis.

No amount of additional ‘how to’s’ will overcome the significant ‘don’t want to’ among some Christians. Christians have to first believe that God is the power unto salvation, there is no other name by which people can and must be saved. In addition to prayer to attack the spiritual battles taking place, the next greatest weapon we have is a changed life that is daily experiencing the love of God and living toward others out of that love and obedience to Christ. Christians with a want to, with the power of the Holy Spirit, will find a way.

Who’s fault is our current short-comings? What institutions are not doing their jobs? Some may want to look to the seminaries as a problem. Some will want to look to our national and state agencies as a problem. Some will look to the cultural mess and mixed up religious views as the problem. While I agree changes can and should be made when necessary, the larger challenge from my perspective is the LOVE problem. As Christians fall more in love with God and live their lives out of this love toward others, we have a greater opportunity to have impact with a refocusing on the Great Commission. Love causes Christians and churches to lean toward lost people. Love also causes lost people to be more open and receptive to the gospel they misunderstand.

Aspired vs. Actual Value:

My mentor Pastor Harold Bullock taught me that every person and every church operates out of their perspectives and their values. Their behaviors, actions will flow through the filters of what they see (perceive) and what really matters to them (value). Churches are famous for having statements of faith and statements of purpose, including ones around the Great Commission, but often those are neglected over time.

Individuals and churches tend to do what they truly value, not just what they say or write that they value. In Values Driven Leadership, Aubrey Malphurs uses a term that I have found quite helpful through the years, “aspired” values. These are the values the church or organization says is important, but may not in fact be an “actual” value of the church or organization.

It is possible and in fact probable that many churches across the SBC hold to the Great Commission as an aspired value, but by their behaviors demonstrated that it is not an actual value. To determine the actual values, look at the programming, the budget, the staffing, the use of leaders, the use of facilities, and what is held up and honored. If the Great Commission is not central in these areas, a church may just want to reevaluate what it is doing.

The Great Commission is not optional for biblical churches. Could it just be that some groups which meet on Sundays, have a preacher, buildings, and programming reflect more the characteristics of a country club than a rescue station for the saints to launch their efforts. Over time most every church will drift away and it will take leaders to help put wind back into the

sails and to move the crew and the boat toward a God-honoring destination, which will include lost people.

Approaches Toward GC:

God is diverse and unique in His creative activity. He chose to make thousands of different kinds of animals and plants. Each one is unique even if they share similar qualities. With people God was and is also creative. He made man and then He made woman, each similar and each unique at the same time.

Humans are similar in so many ways, but each one carries their own DNA descriptors and each one has a unique fingerprint that is shared with no other person. In the same way all churches are different. They are unique and they take unique approaches. And, of those churches across America which are committed to ministry toward the Great Commission, they too take different approaches to advancing the command of Jesus to make disciples of all the nations.

In the following sections we will examine some of the various ways individuals, churches and denominations approach the Great Commission. We will also take a look at some of the major issues around the Great Commission. We will also take survey of the place of the Great Commission in the Bible as a whole.

Different Approaches or Delivery Systems for the Gospel Message

One way to approach or consider the Great Commission is to consider the various delivery systems that are used. There was a period in time as the use of radio expanded, that not only did various mission and ministry organizations begin to use the radio to broadcast the gospel into various parts of the world, they came to believe that radio would be the way the Great Commission was accomplished. While a helpful tool in some ways, with a few decades of perspective and experience, we can see this did not happen.

The following are other delivery systems that have and are being used in different parts of the world to communicate the gospel: short-wave radio, radio, TV, internet, media, print tracts and Bible, large public gatherings such as crusades and other mass evangelism efforts. In the US some churches have begun to use their primary public weekly gathering to evangelize their area. This has carried several names and nuances, but it is often referred to as seeker target or seeker focused services.

Possible Delivery Systems to Great Commission Evangelism:

- radio
- short-wave radio
- TV
- internet
- media
- print tracts & Bibles
- personal evangelism
- public worship – seeker sensitive
- mass evangelism

Regardless of the delivery system used, eventually it takes disciples to make more disciples. We tend to reproduce what we are.

Individual Church Growth and/or Church Planting:

For several decades in the later part of the 20th century, much of what was written and discussed in American church circles was around the topic of how to numerically grow an individual church. As with any movement or emphasis, there were both strengths to this approach and there were limitations as well. God is concerned about numbers, but not just one church's numbers. We in America tend to think about what we can see, what we can count and the more immediate result.

With the opportunities afforded to large churches because of their size, let me say we need large churches who exercise significant strength and voice into a given region or even nationally. Most churches need to grow larger, but it is also true that many churches need to expand their view of church growth to include planting churches across North America and the world as a part of their calling to the Great Commission. For many church leaders they have been trained to believe this is a foreign concept, when in fact it is quite biblical and essential to our overall work here is the US.

As one who planted churches and taught in church planting in one of our SBC seminaries, I am always surprised at the looks I receive when I say to a group that “every church that exists was started”. It is so very obvious, but often overlooked. While church planting does not solve all the problems and in fact it may create some new ones, it too is an essential part of carrying the gospel to all the peoples of the world.

Do vs. Be:

Some approaches to the Great Commission impact what and where the church does what it does. They can compartmentalize what it means to carry out the Great Commission. This can be seen in some projects they put on their calendars. This can be seen in offerings they take up to support missionaries either locally or nationally or internationally. A view toward carrying out the Great Commission is seen in the budgets, calendared events, planned trips and activities.

Another approach or misconception to carrying out the Great Commission is seen in churches which believe that everything they do is somehow connected in an unintentional manner to the Great Commission. Churches can come to a false belief that because they exist, hold worship gatherings, have a pastor, and do various meetings and projects that they are carrying out the Great Commission. By looking at the lives of those in their fellowship and the results of their gatherings, one from the outside would not see a church is not Great Commission focused.

However, it is possible for churches to get focused on their primary task of the Great Commandment and live it out through the Great Commission. It seems the goal is not to assume everything a church does is advancing the Great Commission. It also seems the goal is not to just carry out Great Commission activities, although intentional activities are significant. The church is wise as it approaches the Great Commission by making it the filter by which it lives, both who it is and what it does. It is important for a church to see itself as existing to advance the Kingdom of God in the hearts and lives of people. In the midst of programs, budgets, schedules, staffing, and doing the stuff of church, it needs to be asking, is this helping us either directly or indirectly to love God in such a way as to extend that love to those without Christ.

Location:

One way to view how churches approach the Great Commission is to examine the location of their focus. Some churches are focused on the nations to the ends of the earth through international missions. They are known for their engagement with their time and financial resources to one or more places of the world. Indeed the world is becoming smaller. Churches and people can get to most places of the world both physically and electronically as well.

Other churches are more focused on reaching and discipling those close to the physical location of their primary worship site, their Jerusalem. On a local level, the members are personally in the community and with their neighbors and co-workers as a matter of focus.

For those connected to the Southern Baptist Convention, they can be involved in their region of the state through the work and ministry of their local association. These associations are made up of churches in the region who voluntarily partner to carry out ministry that can be done better through a cooperative effort.

Southern Baptist churches are also involved through their Cooperative Program giving. These funds are sent to their state conventions, which in turn divide those funds between missions needs in the state and the national missional causes. The funds that reach the national offices of the SBC are then divided between national mission causes in North America through the North American Mission Board, international mission causes through the International Mission Board, and the preparing of vocational ministers through the six Southern Baptist Seminaries.

In addition to local and international focuses, some churches are focused on reaching North America through the planting of churches and participating in evangelistic efforts throughout the US and Canada. The majority of Southern Baptist churches are small churches which are located in small and mid-sized cities in the southern part of the US. Some of these churches are involved in Great Commission endeavors in the West or in the Northeast which are not heavily populated with churches affiliated with the SBC and contain major population centers.

Summary:

It is Jesus Himself that summarized the commands of God and lived out in flesh a purposeful and sacrificial example of both the Great Commandment and Great Commission. When in doubt, do what Jesus did. It will not be easy or clean in delivery, but worth the struggle to please God with our lives as an expression of love and gratitude.

Any approach to the Great Commission that does not include a parallel obedience to the Great Commandment is bound to come up short of what it could be. Any approach to live out the Great Commandment that does not include sharing Christ directly and intentionally helping them to grow in obedience is also woefully short. May God grant us the wisdom and courage to live in the tensions of the world which exists and the eternal life to come. May the testimonies of our lives demonstrate we are His disciples.

Resource: Helpful analysis for the church in America: video *Rewiring the American Church* by Harold Bullock at www.haroldbullock.com