



L'Abri Papers #RM03



# The Great Commissions<sup>1</sup>

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*'We need not doubt that the Evangelical movement had a powerful effect in waking up 18<sup>th</sup> century England ..... You floated, safely enough on the little raft of your own faith, eagerly throwing out the lifeline to such drowning neighbours as were ready to catch it; meanwhile the ship was foundering .... '*

Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm*, (Oxford, 1950, p589)

## Summary

**Failure properly to relate the Gospel Commission of the New Testament to the Commission of Genesis (the Creation Mandate) lies behind much of Evangelicalism's current weaknesses and internal conflicts. The New Testament, when clarifying the radical nature of the gospel, appears at times to disparage the created order within which we now live. But this is to misunderstand it. The gospel must in fact be understood in terms of Christ's restoration of creation, the supreme evidence of which is the resurrection of the body, rather than the immortality of the soul.**

## Introduction

Evangelism has always been one of the defining characteristics of Evangelicalism, so much so that the two expressions are often used interchangeably. Though an awkward confusion it does at least reflect a measure of authenticity, for clearly evangelism ought to be normative in the Christian church. Despite this proper emphasis on outreach, however, Evangelicalism has been marginalised in the West. Why? Why, in particular during the last century-and-a-half when evangelism was given such prominence, has it produced such limited results in our culture?

## Evangelism and social involvement - an evangelical dilemma

The varying attempts to come to terms with this marginalisation explain in large measure the history of Evangelicalism during the past half-century. Carl Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (1947) shows, even by its title, the discomfort felt by many younger evangelicals towards their own tradition. They agreed with the stand taken against liberal theology and the 'social gospel', but knew that its intellectual defensiveness and neglect of social action was both biblically untenable and pragmatically disastrous. Hence Henry and others in North America, and their equivalents a little later in the UK, pioneered a different vision which, amongst other things, sought to combine evangelism with a proper engagement socially and intellectually. It was a necessary change and later received international endorsement in the Lausanne Covenant of 1974.

Despite its remarkable achievements, however, Lausanne also produced a rift between differing views of gospel and mission. Centring on the meaning of the phrase ‘the kingdom of God’, heated debate developed. Many felt that social action was distracting the church from its central task of evangelism. The concerns of Scripture, they argued, were being overshadowed by the concerns of society and Evangelicalism’s doctrinal distinctives suffering as a result. As one writer put it, ‘The Evangelicals joined the Liberals in a concern for social issues, but it was the world and not the church which set the agenda.’<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly a conservative ‘reaction’ followed which emphasised the centrality of the Scriptures both in theology and practice, highlighting their importance by means of careful Bible study and expository preaching. In the process, however, it ran the danger of overreaction, particularly in its tendency to place an exclusive emphasis on evangelism. A little while ago, for example, the Australian-based bi-monthly magazine, *The Briefing*, published an article on work which resulted in an unprecedented reader response. To quote a later editor, ‘In the ensuing debate, it became clear that many people were deeply hurt by the implication that paid secular work was anything less than valuable. A number wrote to complain of being made to feel like ‘second-class citizens’ because they weren’t in full-time ministry<sup>3</sup> In similar vein, others have been made to feel that the sole value and significance of secular work is to provide for one’s immediate physical needs and the support of ‘gospel work’. Though not entirely wrong, is this in fact biblical? Is the value of work indeed merely functional? For that matter does the value of *anything* we do as Christians lie solely, or even primarily, in its evangelistic implications?

In *Your Work Matters to God*, Sherman and Hendriks identify four unwarranted assumptions lying behind the belief that evangelism is the only priority Christians should have: that God is more interested in the soul than the body; that the things of eternity are more important than the things of time; that life divides into two categories, the sacred and the secular; and that because of the nature of their work, ministers and other clergy are more important to God’s programme than the laity.<sup>4</sup> These are, of course, views informed as much by Platonic dualism as by the biblical text and unrepresentative of orthodox Christianity. Yet they often issue from an affirmation of Scripture and a reaction against liberal Evangelicalism which we share. One way to overcome this particular dualistic mindset, whilst preserving the appropriate emphasis on Scripture and evangelism, is to re-examine the theology behind the two great commissions of creation and salvation (the Creation Mandate of Genesis 1:28 and the Great Commission of Matthew 28: 18ff) as well as some of the ostensibly biblical arguments used to redress the recent imbalances.

Not that theological reflection by itself is sufficient given the subtlety and complexity of the practical outworking of the biblical teaching in this area. The church has always struggled to find and then maintain the right expression of its two-sided calling, to be fully engaged in the world yet with priorities transformed by its own eternal perspective. Like a boat at anchor, the conflicting currents of creation and salvation, of this world and the next, have pulled the church in different directions: first to recognise the importance of the ‘natural order’ and then to disparage it.

### **The need for a biblical framework**

The question is, does a biblical framework exist within which to understand the relationship between the two? For without one it becomes difficult to moderate the imbalances which easily arise. When Jesus urges his disciples not to lay up treasure on earth but rather in heaven, or to hate themselves or, like grains of wheat, to fall into the ground and die, how is he to be understood? Likewise when Paul exhorts believers to ‘set their minds on things above’ or to ‘beware of vain philosophy’, is he suggesting that Christians should neglect

temporal concerns and disparage the mind? Some sort of 'organising principle' is needed if biblical texts like these are not to be distorted. For, superficially at least, they appear to set creation and salvation in opposition to one another, the physical against the spiritual, the temporal against the eternal. The abiding attraction of Greek dualism is just this, that it resembles biblical Christianity<sup>5</sup>. Yet the differences between them could not be more profound. For the biblical narrative derives its very meaning from the coherence of these two central themes: creation and salvation - whether viewed from the beginning, especially in the creation of the image of God, or from the events that introduced the end - the death, resurrection and ascension of the 'new man', Jesus. As in the famous text John 3:16, it is because 'God so loved the world (which he had created) that he gave his only son' (that all might eventually be restored), Those who would otherwise 'perish' through judgement and death he enables to live eternally because of Christ's salvation, not as disembodied spirits but as restored human beings with resurrected bodies. For the resurrection of Christ, as Oliver O'Donovan puts it, 'directs our attention back to the creation which it vindicates', it constitutes a 'proclamation that the very thing which God has made will continue and flourish', and demonstrates 'that the God who rules the world is the same as the God who made it, and that the outcome of history will affirm and not deny the order of its making'<sup>6</sup>

This is the framework defended and elaborated here, specifically the resurrection of the image of God.

### **The renewal of creation**

An immediate problem with the idea of the renewal of creation however, is that it seems to imply less radical distinctions than Scripture allows, whether between Old and New Testaments, between old and new natures, or between this world and the next. For Jesus insists that everyone must be 'born again' and Paul, likewise, emphasises the need for a 'new creation'. The old cannot simply be tinkered with like a malfunctioning engine; it has to be replaced. 'The old has gone, the new has come!' (2 Corinthians 5: 17). Nothing is clearer in fact than this biblical theme of the failure and incapacity of the original which is weak, transient, distorted, corrupt, demonic even. Doomed to destruction it will be burned up at the Last Day. So the New Testament exhorts us to 'live as aliens and strangers' in this life, to look beyond this life, to look beyond this world to a city with lasting foundations.<sup>7</sup>

Superficially these and similar passages make it seem as if the New Testament takes a negative view of human experience and culture. But this is to misread it. Humanity is corrupt and powerless - left to itself. But, like polluted water or a damaged work of art, the fault lies not with the water or the picture but with what has become of them. The water remains good in essence, so does the picture. Both need to be restored to purity and beauty.

So with human nature. I am helpless to save or change myself unaided; only Christ can redeem me. But what he rescues me from is not my 'self' in the sense of my created being. I am saved, rather, from the guilt and power of sin. I am gradually restored to the sort of experience for which I was made. The humanity ruined in Adam is rescued in Christ; it is delivered even from death and as such becomes a new creation. But all in continuity with what exists now, as Paul stresses in his analogy of a seed and its resultant 'body' different yet the same.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the ordinary categories of human experience are affirmed by God. By definition they enable me to be his image. I accept all my experience as 'spiritual'. The more 'ordinary' I am, the more Christian my experience becomes - ordinary in the sense of the original self as made by God, the self without sin, the self as defined by God which thinks, acts, feels; which is able to enter into social relationships and enjoy and create beauty; which is

humble, pure, patient, kind, self-controlled, and so on. In a word, Christ's *image*. But a virtuous image not merely in a private sense as if individual and social experience can be disengaged from one another. The heart of human experience is social since it reflects the relationship between the members of the Trinity. Therefore Christian compassion and creativity have to be expressed publicly as well as privately - in politics, education, commerce, recreation and so on.

### **The two universal commissions**

Another important element in the biblical framework of the two great commissions is that, while profoundly different, they are equally important. This is not to say that the interest appropriate to creation is never to be subordinated to the exigencies of salvation. Christians are called to a life of sacrifice. Jesus says 'whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am my servant also must be' (John 12:26). As he laid aside what was his by right and made himself a servant so must we. Yet still, as O'Donovan cautions in relation to the debate between kingdom ethics and creation ethics, we must not be 'tempted to overthrow either in the name of the other.'<sup>9</sup>

The two commissions are equally important, first because they are equally *divine and universal commands*. As Adam and Eve and their descendants were sent to exercise dominion over *all* the earth, so the apostles and their followers were sent to preach to *all* peoples. The first was a universal command to exercise righteous and beneficent dominion in keeping with their nature and status as 'the image of God', a command they could no longer fulfil adequately after the fall of Genesis 3, yet binding still. Though limited and corporeal 'creatures', and to that extent similar to their natural surroundings, nevertheless as 'persons' they were distinct. As Bavinck puts it, 'If now we comprehend the force of this "subduing" (dominion) under the term culture ... we can say that culture in the broadest sense is the purpose for which God created man after his image ... (which) includes not only the most ancient callings of ... hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-raising, but also trade and commerce ... and science and art.'<sup>10</sup> None of this is altered by mankind's fall into sin: the New Testament, reflecting the view taken throughout Scripture, refers explicitly to sinful human beings as the image of God (James 3:9).

The Great Commission is a universal command also, though somewhat different. The Creation Mandate is inherent in the way men and women are made, so in that sense unavoidable. The latter involves human choice and divine grace. Only those who have received Christ can pass on the good news. Nevertheless, since the gospel represents the epitome of God's love and reflects his desire that none should be lost, what is true of him must become true of those who are his image. From God's view - that is from the way reality actually is - the idea of love is inconceivable without the proclamation of the gospel. Therefore, following Christ and sharing his love means being completely committed, like him, as an 'evangelist'.

### **Problems and disagreements**

Yet, if Christians are supposed to take the Creation Mandate this seriously, why does the New Testament contain few if any unequivocal references to public and social action, or to art and culture? Why if these are legitimate and necessary concerns are they not spelled out more clearly? Why too, using the familiar illustration of the Titanic, should we spend time rearranging the deckchairs on a doomed ship? Surely other concerns have to be subordinated to evangelism, for this is all that really matters into eternity, the destiny of the lost?

### ***Silence of the New Testament***

This first argument overlooks the background of the Old Testament, the only scripture used by the apostolic church and presupposed by the New Testament. Like the warp and woof of a tapestry, the threads of which are so fundamental to the fabric that the whole cannot be 'seen' (let alone exist) apart from them, the Old is present in the New. Sexuality, for example, can be understood only in reference to the biblical creation. This is the force of Jesus' reply when questioned by the Pharisees about divorce. Though divorce is allowed, the norm remains 'as at the beginning', life-long monogamy (Mark 10:1-2). The same is true of other aspects of human experience less clearly expressed in the New Testament, such as beauty and creativity. They are important because God is concerned about them and we are made like him. Yet they find little mention in the New Testament. Is it then legitimate to encourage Christian believers in the arts? Certainly. For beauty is intrinsic to mankind, explicit in creation, and illustrated within the Old Testament (as in the design and building of the tabernacle). And though Jesus' encouragement to his disciples to 'consider the lilies of the field' is addressed primarily to the need for trust, its aesthetic significance surely cannot be denied. 'Solomon in all his *glory* was not arrayed like one of these' (Matthew 6:28).

In respect to social action not only do we find an intrinsic logic in Scripture (the fact that every human being has been made for society), but the Old Testament is full of God's instructions concerning the wellbeing of Israel. And if the Pentateuchal laws may not now be applied *simpliciter*, as if laws designed for all nations just as they stand, at the very least they indicate the seriousness with which God views the larger social relationships of nationhood. Likewise, since political justice is so important, the Psalmist draws a parallel between human rule and God's rule (Psalm 82). Yet the New Testament nowhere encourages believers to become involved, in law. Similarly in relation to the education of children in schools, the development of science in universities, the practice of medicine in hospitals, etc. In all these the New Testament is silent. Yet within the western culture all are in large measure the product of Christian civilisation. Why? Because they are rooted in the distinctive understanding of reality provided by the doctrine of creation. They do not need specific endorsement in the New Testament for they are implicit.

This argument is strengthened, of course, by the way Jesus reinforces the Old Testament principle of national or State authority. His simple directive to give to Caesar what is Caesar's reflects the continuing relevance of government, even when unjust - not simply as a social order his disciples should acknowledge, but one they should actively engage in.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Gospel priority***

While the phrase 'gospel priority' is not itself scriptural, it helps reinforce the urgency of the Great Commission, and in that sense is entirely appropriate. When Scripture speaks of the need of the world - including nature's groaning - it posits one solution only: rescue by the only Saviour. Christians concerned to see political and social improvements in society need to keep this prominent in their thinking and doing. Legislation is powerless to reform sinners. Material aid alone cannot bring lasting amelioration to stricken communities. Idolatry and sin remain the root causes of social distress and only the gospel of Christ has power to deal with them adequately. Yet, in the light of the 'resurrection framework', it is important to remember that the gospel priority is one of efficacy not replacement. The efficacy of the gospel in bringing sinners to salvation does not preclude the significance of the creation order, especially our need to care for a broken world. The two must not be separated. Concern to communicate the gospel is not a concern for 'souls' but for flesh-and-blood people with all their needs. Nor should our being-in-the-world be treated as if only a vehicle from which to rescue the drowning. Life in all its variety has value in and of itself.

### ***Careers and ministry***

What then of the importance of ‘ministry’? If the Word of God is central in Christian life does it not follow that those called to its teaching have a more important role than others? Again, yes and no. For while it is essential for the church to encourage many towards ministry, whether at home or abroad, and to honour them highly through prayer and financial support, this must not be confused with clericalism - as if ‘word-based-ministry is first-class and everything else secondary. Paul’s encouragement to ‘seek the higher gifts especially that you may prophesy’ (1 Corinthians 14:1) is a call addressed to all believers. All are exhorted to a deepening understanding and experience of God’s revealed truth so that they can communicate the gospel’s significance authoritatively to Christian and non-Christian alike. It is emphatically not a call to leave secular employment to be ‘ordained for the ministry’ - though some will. Rather the concepts of ministry and mission have to be enlarged so that the specific ‘gift’ of teaching as exercised within the ecclesia is understood to be for the sake of the world. ‘(God) ... gave some to be ... pastors and teachers, to prepare (his) people for works of service ...’ (Ephesians 4:11, 12). The purpose of word-based ministry in the church is, in part, to enable word-based ministry (service as well as evangelism, prophecy as well as proclamation) within the world. And the degree to which this broader work of the gospel is successful indicates the success of ‘ministry’.

Therefore the notion that one type of ministry is better than any other needs consciously to be avoided. When Jesus summons his disciples to leave all and follow him, or when he urges us to pray for ‘labourers in the harvest’ he is not expecting the answer to be simply an increase in the number of clergy, important as they are. For ‘harvesting’ by means of the gospel is the responsibility not primarily of those we call ‘ministers’ or ‘missionaries’ but of all believers equally. By insisting that the Great Commission is a universal responsibility and by enabling Christians, whatever their spheres of work and life, to develop a Christian mind and a Christian attitude of service, those who preach and teach in church enable the gospel to penetrate the whole of society. What such teaching should be is an important concern but falls outside the scope of this brief survey. However, if secular employment is described simply in terms of ‘feeding your face’ it cannot help but limit the possibility of the gospel’s penetration of society. The biblical alternative is to make Christians aware of the breadth of limit the possibility of the gospel’s penetration of society. The biblical alternative is to make Christians aware of the breadth of their calling and responsibility, as Paul puts it ‘to bring every thought captive to obey Christ’ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

### ***Gospel and community***

But in what sense *should* we be concerned for ‘the whole of society’? Part of the answer lies in a better understanding of the New Testament’s emphasis on community. Interestingly, community is a more prominent concern of the New Testament letters than mission. Community is not just an adjunct of mission but an essential part of the purposes of God. As well as benefiting those within, it constitutes the supreme reflection of the being and nature of God; the loving unity and diversity of the Trinity from ‘before the world began’ (John 17:21; 13:35). Indeed, to affirm the diversity of God’s world and to demonstrate the dignity and glory of a humanity in process of being redeemed by Christ, is to provide the most effective (not to mention indispensable) platform for evangelism. The importance and attractiveness of Christian community, particularly in its ordinariness, cannot be over-stated within the context of an increasingly fragmented postmodern society. But community requires constant nurturing and necessitates the affirmation of all types of human experience for its fullness to be revealed (1 Corinthians 12:14ff).

However, the New Testament’s ‘church’ focus indicated no lack of concern for secular

society. The Bible never isolated itself from the larger context of society. In fact the opposite is the case. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan is aimed specifically at ecclesiastical parochialism in the area of human need. The Christian is responsible for his or her 'neighbour' and a neighbour is everyone he or she meets. As Jesus healed all and fed all, so Christians are to show compassion to all in need. Likewise he tells us to let our light shine before men so that they may see our good deeds and glorify our father in heaven, clearly indicating the need for a concern beyond the limits of Christian community, as well as an ultimate evangelistic objective. One wonders how this overarching compassion towards human need and suffering in Scripture comes to be limited to individual philanthropy. For that is how some interpret the alleged 'silence' of the New Testament. Quite unnecessarily they choose private social responsibility (in which they often excel) to the detriment of public. But why?

### ***The transience of this world***

The fact that Scripture encourages an eschatological perspective and warns against an improper focus upon the present leaves the principle of creation unchanged. Mortality surrounds us on every hand. The world awaits a judgement in which all will be burned by fire (2 Peter 3:6). But in both cases human action derives value not from its permanence but from its provenance. Though it springs immediately from human thought and energy it derives value and meaning from God. Hence we are exhorted to glorify him in all we do morally and physically, for the two cannot be separated. Love's profoundest expression is a body nailed to a cross. The judgement of 'sheep and goats' rest upon material kindnesses - cups of water, clothing and prison visiting (Matthew 25:31). On Christ's authority what endures beyond the final judgement includes the physical and temporal. 'Whatever you did to one of the least of these ... you did to me', he says. In addition, the New Testament heralds the restoration of all things; even the non-personal creation will be 'liberated from its bondage to decay', and 'the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into the Holy City, the New Jerusalem' (Romans 8:21; Revelation 21:24). Human society and culture are important to God and retain their value *in him* even though transient. Hence Luther's famous remark: 'If I knew Jesus would return tomorrow I would plant a tree today'. This is Reformation Christianity. This is Biblical Christianity.

### **Conclusion**

The competing tensions between Scripture's two 'great' commissions, the tides of creation and gospel, help to explain some of our current difficulties as evangelicals. Simultaneously, the culture's intellectual and moral bankruptcy presents us with unprecedented opportunities, which sadly are being squandered. Partly this is because Evangelicalism has yet to discover and maintain a proper coherence between the two commissions. Either social activism has been promoted at the expense of the 'gospel priority', or the Creation Mandate has been neglected. The fact that on one side the vital evangelical distinctives of the past (biblical doctrine, expository preaching, and evangelism) are being recovered and emphasised gives hope of improvement. But, in the absence of a proper recovery of the significance of the Creation Mandate' for evangelism, the long-term effects of such reforms will be limited. Though superficially more 'orthodox' they threaten to return us, ironically, to the very ineffectiveness from which our leaders in the 1940s sought to rescue us.

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<sup>1</sup> This L'Abri Lecture was first published as part of the CAMBRIDGE PAPERS series and is reprinted with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Fred. Catherwood quoted in *Evangelical Social Action Today*, (ed) M. Tinker, Christian Focus, 1995, see pp 189, 191 - see also p54 on liberal scholarship

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<sup>3</sup> *The Briefing*, St. Matthias Press, Nos 178/9, cf No 176. 3 NavPress, Colorado, 1990,

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<sup>5</sup> further treatment of Platonism see R. Macaulay and J. Barrs, *Being Human*, Solway, 1996, p 29ff.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Apollos, 1994, pp 31, 53; see too CE Hummel, *the Galileo Connection*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1986, p 218.

<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 11:13, 1 Peter 2:11, 2 Peter 3:7

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:37. O'Donovan *ibid*: all of chapter 3, 'Eschatology and History', is helpful.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* p15

<sup>10</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, Baker, 1977, pp 206,207

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 22:21; cf. 21:12; Acts 16:37