

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN'S COMMISSION AND MESSAGE TO THE WORLD?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

A headline in the November 3, 1992 issue of *Christianity Today* reads, "Moscow Opens its Heart to the Gospel." And who was in the center of all this good news but Billy Graham! This wonderful and faithful servant of our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ held a spiritual crusade in the capital of what was formerly called the "evil empire" at the end of October. His message was on the cross of Jesus Christ. It was a message of love, hope, and salvation for all who place their faith in our risen Lord. On the last Sunday some fifty thousand Russians jammed the stadium, and twenty thousand watched the program outside in the cold on large TV screens. Officials said this was the largest crowd to ever hear the gospel at one time in the former Soviet Union. One official said, "People are tired of history [tradition] and want to personally experience the presence of God in their lives." Reflecting on his visit, Graham said, "I have never seen such a hunger in people for spiritual things. Over there there's been a spiritual starvation for many years. I seriously doubt that there is a place in the world so open to the gospel." When Graham invited people to come forward to give their hearts to Jesus Christ so he could become their personal Lord and Savior, he had to appeal to the inquirers surging forward to walk and not run. There was no music playing, and the article said that the only sound was the muffled beat of thousands of feet making their way to the front.

It is because of the crucifixion and then the resurrection of Jesus Christ that those Russians have now been placed into the spiritual body of Christ along with the millions upon millions of other believers throughout the ages. The crucifixion of Jesus deals with the sin of mankind, and the resurrection of Jesus offers each believer the hope of eternal life, beginning at the moment they invite him into their life. None of this would have happened in Moscow if Billy Graham and his team had not been obedient to our risen Lord's great commission and faithful to the message of the crucifixion and resurrection. So let's turn to Matthew 28:16-20 and look at his commission, and then we will turn to Luke 24:44-49 and find out what is to be the content of our witness.

The Great Commission

But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated. And when they saw Him, they worshiped Him; but some were doubtful. And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Matthew 28:16-20

After the disciples arrived in Galilee in obedience to the Lord's command, he appeared to seven of them on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and over a breakfast of love he challenged Peter's love for him and then encouraged him: "Shepherd My sheep" (see John 21:1-19). Now our risen Lord appeared to the eleven disciples on a mountain slope and gave them their commission for ministry within the age of the Spirit. This occurred between the events of Luke 24:43 and 44.

In Galilee, home for most of the disciples, they were safe from the ever-present religious and political forces around the temple area. This was where Jesus had told his disciples to meet him as he broke bread at their last supper with him before the cross: "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee" (Matthew 26:32). Now on the mountain Jesus had designated, as the eleven men looked at their risen Lord, their hearts and minds were filled with mixed emotions. They worshipped him as their Lord and Savior, the Son of God, their

long-promised Messiah and King. But in their humanity some of them were doubtful. I don't believe by this time that Thomas, Peter, or John doubted what they were seeing and experiencing, but nevertheless some still did. They had seen, touched, and eaten with their wonderful risen Lord, but they were having a hard time getting used to him. They were in the process of becoming mature.

"And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.'" When Jesus had been in his body of humanity his authority had been limited as he submitted to the will of his Father. "...He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). He had done nothing but the will of his Father. Now the risen Lord Jesus was standing before them because his Father had "...highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth..." (Philippians 2:9-11). Since his resurrection our Lord Jesus Christ had been given unlimited power and authority over sickness and death, over political and religious powers, and over visible and invisible "world forces of this darkness and spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). And since he had been given all authority over the visible and invisible universe as the one and only sovereign Lord, he now intended to offer redemption to the world, for our Lord's ministry had not changed: "...the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The disciples needed to be assured of this spiritual reality when they were given their commission to move out into the fallen and devilish world with his message of redemption.

Jesus then gave them their great commission: "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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Let's examine this statement in detail. He said, "Go therefore [in my authority]...." The verb should read, "In your going," or "Having gone." Evangelism is assumed. "...And make disciples of all the nations." Making disciples is a command. This is the heart of our Lord's great commission. In the very beginning of his ministry on the shores of the sea of Galilee we found him walking along the beach. He called out to two local fishermen, Simon and his brother Andrew, who were casting a net into the sea. "...Jesus said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.' And they immediately left the nets and followed Him" (Mark 1:17-20). He then invited James and John to follow him, and soon he had twelve men.

Over the next three years he began the process of making disciples of these men so that when he left this earth and returned to his Father the same wonderful message of redemption would continue until he returned to set up his kingdom. He encouraged these men with words like, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine..." (John 8:31). "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). "By this is My father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples" (John 15:8). When the disciples began to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the message of spiritual redemption, God moved the hearts of the listeners to place their faith in his Son as their Lord and Savior. And once these new believers declared their faith in Jesus as their Lord, the disciples were commanded to spend time with them to "make disciples" of them in turn, to teach and prepare those new believers to walk in the truth of Jesus Christ.

Yesterday I met a beautiful Christian who told me, "I belong to a church where I can't get anyone to disciple me. I went to my pastor, and he had no time for me. I'm frustrated, because I have a hunger to teach, and they gave me a class, but I don't know what I'm doing. Every week when I show up I'm terrified with the tension between wanting to teach and not knowing how. Can you help me?" Well, pastor-teachers are called by God to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. This process involves an appeal not only to the heart but to the will and the mind. Paul, in writing to one of his disciples, Timothy, gives us a concise description of this process: "...the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men [and women], who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:1-2).

I was talking to someone else this week about Ray Stedman. It was wonderful to hear this man say, "I hadn't seen Ray in years, but but he was really a discipler of men, wasn't he?" Ray not only brought to us the good news of

Jesus Christ, but he just poured his life into all of us. Many of us received his wonderful discipling.

Jesus continued, "...of all the nations...." During our Lord's ministry on earth there had been times when he had given his disciples authority over unclean spirits and diseases and sickness, but at those times he told them, "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6). And on one occasion he had told his disciples that he did not want to relate to a Canaanite woman because "[he] was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). But now that Israel had rejected their King and Messiah, the resurrected Lord of lords was setting his disciples free to go into the whole world and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles as well as the Jews.

"...Baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." As new believers came into the spiritual body of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord instructed his disciples to have them baptized or publicly dipped in water as a physical symbol--something they could feel--of the inner spiritual reality: being identified with our Lord's death, burial, and resurrection (see Romans 6). This physical witness of baptism would clearly identify them publicly as disciples of Jesus Christ. It was to be a one-time spiritual and physical experience. (Note: The new believers were to be baptized in the name, not names, of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit, showing the oneness of our triune God.)

"...Teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...." A disciple can teach a new believer only what he has been taught and what he himself obeys. Jesus taught his disciples the facts about three relationships: (1) His relationship with his Father. "...I am in the Father, and the Father in Me...." (John 14:11). (2) His relationship with them. "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). (3) His relationship with the enemy. "...that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil..." (Hebrews 2:14). At this church your under-shepherds are all encouraged by the elders to spend time discipling men and women and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded us. In both our private and public teaching our curriculum has these same three themes: (1) the new covenant, which is about our relationship with God; (2) body life, which is about our relationship with each other; and (3) spiritual warfare, which is about our relationship with our spiritual enemy.

"...Lo [remember], I am [present tense] with you always [now and forever], even to the end of the age." Jesus was saying, "Because all authority has been given to me by my Father since I have been raised to glory, in my new resurrected body I am now able to be with each one of you day in and day out as you minister by my power and in my name until the end of the age--until I come again. I am no longer limited as to where I can be at any given moment in time. I can be with all of you at once wherever you are and whatever nation you are ministering in. I will never leave you or forsake you. At times I will be visible and at times I will be invisible, but I will always be present."

A great example of this is when the apostle Paul some twenty-five years after our Lord's Ascension moved into the wicked city of Corinth on his second missionary journey. At one point he became so fearful that our risen Lord appeared to him in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-11). This is a wonderful encouragement for us, for no matter what situation we get into as followers of Jesus Christ, the Lord, who used to be limited in his humanity on this earth and could be with only twelve or so at a time, now can be with each one of us in great intimacy, and he promises he will never leave. We are never alone. And in that intimacy he protects us, guides us, instructs us--meeting whatever our need is at the moment.

Now according to the *Harmony of the Gospels* [Moody Press] our risen Lord told his disciples to go back up to Jerusalem, where he appeared for the last time before ascending to the Father. They had been commissioned to move out into the world with the gospel of redemption and the command to make disciples. In Jerusalem he would give them more clarity from the Scriptures that he was their Messiah as well as the content of the message they were to preach once the Father sent to them the Holy Spirit of promise.

The Great Message

Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." Luke 24:44-49

Jesus had been "...appearing to them over a period of forty days, and speaking of the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). In the holy city our Lord taught the disciples again from the Scriptures, showing them that all that had happened to him during Passover week was the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Then he encouraged them to proclaim the good news of salvation to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem.

"Now he said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." In this he was affirming to them that he was the Messiah, not merely because he proclaimed himself to be, but because he fulfilled the Scriptures. These are some of the same words and certainly the same ideas that our risen Lord had communicated to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus Easter afternoon, but now he added that he and his suffering and resurrection were spoken of in the Psalms.

"...He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had said later, "Were not our hearts burning within us...while He was explaining the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). (Probably all of us have known people who read the Bible and could not understand it. But even the disciples could not understand how Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures until he opened their minds.) He opened their minds to understand his death, burial, and resurrection, saying, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day." Psalms 22, 34; and Isaiah 53:1-9, for example, show that Christ must suffer for the sins of mankind. Psalms 2, 16, 68, 110; Jonah 1:17; and Hosea 6:2 show that Christ must be raised from the dead. Some sixty years later the apostle John, then the only living apostle left on earth, would write to the spiritual children in western Turkey, "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true, and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20).

As a result of this amazing truth our Lord then commissioned the disciples to preach the good news that "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." This brings a poignant episode from our trip to Germany to mind. By the second night we were with the Ukrainians, they had started to trust us (Carl Gallivan, Ray Cookingham, Anne Marie, myself, and others). And one large, handsome man, after talking with us over dinner, came up to me and said, "I've been watching you. If you were my priest, I would confess all my sins." (He came out of a Greek Orthodox background.) He wanted to confess his sins to somebody and to be forgiven. I couldn't do it, but I told him that in Jesus Christ he had a great High Priest, and that he could confess his sins to Jesus right then. You know, the whole world is crying out in a variety of ways, "I have sinned, and I need to confess to somebody! To whom can I confess?"

The forgiveness of sins that the disciples were to proclaim was based on our Lord's willingness to go to the cross, take upon himself the sin of humanity, and save us all from the wrath of God. Because of that, Jesus our risen Lord and Savior could now forgive us of our sin--and he was the only one who could. John later wrote, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). And Peter said to the Jewish supreme court, "...there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The disciples were the witnesses of all these events: the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. Now by the power of their risen Lord they were to finally understand the fulfillment of all the prophecy of the Old Testament. So our risen Lord set the stage to move his men out into the world with the good news of redemption

in the name of Jesus--except for one thing: They needed the indwelling Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit was promised by the Father in such Old Testament passages as Isaiah 44:3; Ezekiel 36:27; and Joel 2:28. Now Jesus told them, "And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." At our Lord's last supper with them in his humanity, he had been preparing his disciples for the difficult days ahead when he encouraged them with the promise, "...I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you" (John 14:16-17). He also encouraged them, "...the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you" (verse 26). For this reason the risen Lord told his disciples not to begin their ministry until after they were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

So often in my own life I feel a certain natural adequacy because I have some experience and background. But I notice that every new situation I get into, the Lord reminds me of my inadequacy, and I am brought back to him so I can say, "Unless you fill me and control me, there may be some activity here, but it will have no eternal consequence. Please express yourself through me. May I have your power to make this come alive? May this be a situation where you are greatly blessed!" If I don't do that, it will just be religious flesh all dressed up, and it will really have no effect for eternity. We need to guard against that. Our lives are designed by God to be filled with him and empowered by his Spirit so that his eternal message can penetrate the community we live in.

Because of the resurrection mankind had the hope of having their sins forgiven and beginning a new life in Christ. But just as the crucifixion was a stumbling block to the Jews (because Deuteronomy 21:23 says, "...he who is hanged is accursed of God..." and they did not understand that Jesus hung on the cross for our sins, not his own); the resurrection of Jesus Christ would become foolishness to the Gentiles. After the Day of Pentecost and the healing of the lame man in the temple area, Peter and John were preaching that in Jesus was the resurrection from the dead when the Jewish priests and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly disturbed by this teaching, and threw them in jail. The Gentiles also thought that the resurrection was foolishness as we later find out when Paul went before the city fathers and philosophers of Athens. "[Some were saying], 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities'--because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection...now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer..." (Acts 17:18, 32). But Peter would later write the greatest words of hope to the Christians of Western Turkey: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). And Christ by his power can overcome that resistance in people's hearts.

Finally in Luke 24:50-51 we find: "And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. And it came about while He was blessing them, He parted from them." Acts 1:9-11 continues, "And a cloud received Him out of their sight...and...two men in white clothing stood beside them; they also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.'" Luke concludes, "And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising God" (24:52-53). Within ten days, during the Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon all of them who loved the Lord, and the great adventure of the Age of the Spirit began and continues to this very hour.

So the disciples were given the great commission: "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; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Behind that commission was the message, in Paul's words, that God the Father "...delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians.1:13-14). And behind both the commission and the message was the power of the wonderful Holy Spirit, who would and now does empower all of our Lord's disciples to fulfill our ministry.

Luke would later pen the first words in the book of Acts: "The first account [that is, the Gospel of Luke] I

composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen" (Acts 1:1-2). As part of those orders, we, having inherited the commission and the message from the apostles, are to go and make disciples, preach the gospel, and be a witness of Christ to the very next person we meet when led by the Holy Spirit.

This is a sad day for me--we've finished Luke! I've loved Luke. But I'm happy that many of you have heard these sixty-nine messages. We have been in Luke for so long that some of you thought I was in a rut. That's not really the case. I wanted us to take our time because Luke has really shown us who Jesus is. He has shown us that Jesus is our wonderful Savior, Lord, and Shepherd--this lover of tax collectors, sinners, and blind beggars. Everywhere he went he just kept walking among the people (except for the religious class). Everyone wanted to be around him. He would walk and talk, touch, pray, care, and rebuke. He loved everyone, didn't he?

Every week we have heard about Jesus and have been greatly encouraged, motivated, rebuked, and built up. Jesus is our only hope, the only one who can give us eternal life. Once he gives us life and heals us of our sin and brokenness, and once he penetrates our life with his Holy Spirit, he doesn't want us to ever stop talking about it. He wants us to talk about him everywhere you go, share him in deed and word, until he comes again. And we can, because we have his Holy Spirit. So we need to constantly ask the Lord to set us free to be bold.

What a wonderful and commissioned life our risen Lord and Savior has called us to! And what a wonderful message of love and hope for a fallen humanity: Our sin can be forgiven in Christ Jesus because he was willing to go to the cross on our behalf, and then we can have the living hope of eternal life because of his resurrection from dead.

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