

THE GREAT, GREATER, GREATEST COMMISSION*Scripture Reading: II Corinthians 5:18-21*

God has always had a job for His people to do. We call these jobs "commissions." Noah was commissioned to build an ark and be a "preacher of righteousness" (II Peter 2:5). Abraham was commissioned to leave his kindred and become a blessing to all the families of the earth. (See Genesis 12:1-3.)

In Old Testament times, the nation of Israel was to be a light to the Gentiles, as they will be some day (Isaiah 49:6). But throughout their history, they failed to carry out their commission. Therefore, when Christ came to earth, He said, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). How could Israel be a light to the nations if she herself was lost? In Matthew 10, the Lord sent His twelve apostles out on a "great commission" to preach the gospel of the kingdom "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt.10:6). After His resurrection, Christ gave the disciples an even "greater commission" to go to "all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). After this, they could preach "in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). But not all Jerusalem believed, and the apostles, true to their commission, stayed where they were (Acts 8: 1).

It was then that God raised up the Apostle Paul to go to the Gentiles. To him and us was entrusted the "greatest commission" of all. It is recorded in II Corinthians 5:20, "Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." Are you carrying out God's "great commission" for this dispensation?

JF*Notes:***THE GREATEST COMMISSION
(Continued)***Scripture Reading: Ephesians 3:9*

In the last lesson, we saw that God has always had a commission for His people to carry out. Our commission today is not the one given to Noah, Abraham, or to the twelve apostles. Rather, we currently operate under the commission given to and through Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles. This commission is found in II Corinthians 5:14-21 and involves the ministry of reconciling men to the God who has already reconciled the world to Himself.

But as great as this responsibility is, there is a second part to our commission. This is stated by Paul in Ephesians 3:9, "And to make all men see what is the fellowship (Greek—"dispensation") of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ." This was the burden on Paul's heart when he wrote to Timothy, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will (desires to) have all men saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Timothy 2:3, 4).

This is the pattern Paul followed at Corinth. When he first came into town, he says, "For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2). But after men were saved, Paul continued on with the second part of his commission: "Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect...we speak the wisdom of God in a *mystery*" (I Corinthians 2:6,7). We must all do our part to bring the gospel of salvation to a lost and dying world. But not being content with only half a job, we must also proclaim the mystery to those who are saved!

JF*Notes:*

THE TRANSITION

Scripture Reading: I Corinthians 13:10

“But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away” (I Corinthians 13:10). When Paul wrote these words, God’s dealings with men were in a state of change. Israel had manifested her unbelief through killing the prophets, murdering God’s Son and resisting the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51, 52). Now God would set the favored nation aside and begin a new work among the Gentiles, but this was not to happen over night.

The book of Acts records the transition period. This is the time during which the Jewish program was gradually “shut down,” and the Gentile ministry was brought “on line.” The unique feature of this time is that elements of both the old and the new were in operation all at once. This is why the book of Acts seems confusing to many.

Take, for example, the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 2:38 Peter tells the multitude they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit if they repent and be baptized. In Acts 10:44, 45 Cornelius’ household receives the Holy Spirit without being baptized. Then in Acts 19:6, the disciples of John received the Holy Spirit only after Paul laid his hands on them. Why were there so many different methods of receiving the Holy Spirit? The answer is, because of the transition. Many, disregarding the transition, still try to receive the Holy Spirit through the various methods found in the book of Acts. This only leads to confusion. Today, the Holy Spirit is received through “the hearing of faith” (Galatians 3:2). Understanding the transition clarifies this and many other theological issues as well.

JF

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CHRIST’S EARTHLY MINISTRY

Scripture Reading: Romans 15:8

Romans 15:8 neatly summarizes the scope and purpose of Christ’s earthly ministry: “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers.” These include the promise to make Abraham’s family a blessing to all families of the earth (Genesis 12:3), the promise to multiply his seed to innumerable proportions (Genesis 13:16), and the promise to give unto him the land of Palestine (Genesis 13:14, 15).

Everything Christ did and taught while He walked this earth was designed to bring the people of Israel back into line with these great promises, so that they in turn could be the blessing to the rest of the earth. But the Israelites of that generation would not submit to Christ’s authority. Christ summarized their attitude in the parable of the ten pounds; “But his citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14). The chief priests themselves confirmed this attitude when they cried out, “We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15).

In early Acts, Peter once more called Israel to repentance, reminding them: “Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed” (Acts 3:25). But once again, Israel’s leaders rejected God’s offer. Now these promises are being postponed until this present age runs its course (Romans 11:25). Then the ministry Christ began while on earth, will finally be brought to completion.

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THE TWO GOSPELS

Scripture Reading: Galatians 2:7

Many speak of “preaching the gospel,” but all too few spend much time identifying *which* gospel they have in mind. The reason for this is because a lot of folks believe there is only one gospel in the Bible. But in today’s text, Paul identifies two gospels: “the gospel of the uncircumcision” and “the gospel of the circumcision” (Galatians 2:7).

The gospel of the circumcision was God’s good news for His covenant people, Israel. The most common name for this gospel is “the gospel of the kingdom,” and it is the message Christ preached while He was on earth (Matthew 4:23). It is known as the gospel of the kingdom because it offered Israel the prophesied kingdom of God upon the earth if only they would repent. Of course, Israel as a whole did not repent in the time of Christ and the apostles, therefore the offer of this kingdom is presently being postponed until this dispensation of grace is finished.

The gospel of the uncircumcision is God’s good news for this dispensation. It is also known as “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24) and was committed unto the apostle Paul. The reason it is designated the gospel of the *uncircumcision* is it offers salvation by grace through faith without any religious ceremonies. The gospel of the kingdom required law-keeping (Matthew 19:17), repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38), but the gospel of grace requires only faith (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

The gospel of the grace of God is summarized in I Corinthians 15:1-4. We must believe that “Christ died for our sins...that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day.”

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THE RAPTURE & THE REVELATION

Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31; I Thessalonians 4:16, 17

As we “rightly divide the word of truth” (II Tim. 2:15), one of the key distinctions that emerges is the difference between the rapture and the second coming of Christ. Bible teachers have long mixed the two and have lead their hearers into needless confusion.

The second coming of Christ (also known as the “revelation” of Jesus Christ) was prophesied throughout the Old Testament, and it involves the return of Jesus Christ to *the earth* to set up His throne in Jerusalem. Zechariah writes, “And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives which is before Jerusalem on the east” (Zechariah 14:4a). This, of course, is the same location from which He left the earth two thousand years ago (Acts 1:10-12). “When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory” (Matthew 25:31). This will signal the beginning of Christ’s earthly kingdom. All of this takes place “immediately after the tribulation” (Matthew 24:29a).

The rapture was a secret, not revealed in Old Testament times. Paul includes it as part of the great mystery revealed to him. (See I Corinthians 15:51.) The rapture, or catching away of the Body of Christ, involves Christ’s coming *in the air* (I Thessalonians 4:17), not to the earth as the second coming. The rapture will occur before the tribulation period when God’s wrath is poured out upon the earth. “For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thessalonians 5:9).

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ONE BAPTISM*Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4:4-6*

For centuries, the greatest bone of contention among Christians has been the subject of baptism. Just ask five average church members what baptism is for and how it should be administered, and you'll probably get six or seven different answers! What division has been wrought in the church by disobeying Ephesians 4:3-6. Here we are told to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Then we are told how to do it.

We must all affirm that there is "one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). Most Christians would agree on six of these points but seem to have a hard time acknowledging that there is only one baptism in this dispensation. While many recognize the spiritual baptism which unites us to Christ (I Corinthians 12:13), they doggedly cling to a ritual, water baptism, as well.

Even more tragic is the fact that many place more emphasis on their ritual baptism than they do on true, spiritual baptism; or, they teach that the spiritual comes only after the ritual is performed. The result of all this has been confusion and division among believers.

Even though it is unpopular to do so, let us reaffirm the "one baptism" so often referred to by the Apostle Paul. Then let us pray that the Holy Spirit will use His word to restore the unity which was lost when the church turned its back on this blessed truth!

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*Notes:***BY SIGNS OR BY FAITH?***Scripture Reading: II Corinthians 5:7*

Throughout the ages, God has chosen different methods of dealing with His people. When the nation of Israel was still in God's favor as His chosen nation, He used miraculous signs to communicate with her. The very stars of heaven were originally given to be for "signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years" (Genesis 1:14). David recognized this purpose when he wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handywork" (Psalm 19:1).

When Ahaz was king of Judah, the Lord made him this amazing offer, "Ask thee a sign of the Lord thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above" (Isaiah 7:11). When Ahaz refused to do so, the Lord answered, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). This sign was fulfilled in the virgin birth of Christ.

Because of God's continual use of signs among the Israelites, Paul would write years later, "For the Jews require a sign" (I Corinthians 1:22a). Unfortunately, the church has also tried to operate according to signs, resulting in much confusion. Today, Christ has chosen another method to speak to His people, the Church which is His Body. This is through the completed, written Word of God. In II Corinthians 5:7, Paul writes, "For we walk by faith, not by sight." Where do we get the faith to walk the Christian life? "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Romans 10:17). Do not wait for some sign from God for your direction in life. Go directly to His Word!

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