

Scripture: Precept and Promise

God is not moved to make His promises by our worthiness, merits, or good works; but He promises purely on the basis of His inexhaustible and eternal goodness and mercy.

~Martin Luther~

“Let’s press in to seek God’s face so He’ll release His blessings.” ... “We need to throw away all that divides us and unite in love for Jesus in the realm of prayer so that the Spirit will flow through our city.” ... “If only we would walk in the Spirit, with clean hands and a pure heart, then God would release His blessings and push back the powers of darkness.” ... “God is calling us to incarnate Christ and partner with Him in building His kingdom of love and justice.” ... “God wants to do a new thing in the coming generation, to achieve the revolution of love initiated by Christ.” ... “In a spirit of prayer, we need to simply go where He says go, love on the poor, and obey with reckless abandon.” ... “God commands us to love Him and love others, and we will only finish the Great Commission if we love the world to Jesus.”

I've heard all these and more from Great Commission servants, mobilizers, students, and some even from my own zealous heart. They are indicative of a blend of juvenile naiveté, prime-of-life health, theological greenness, social-media crowd-mentality, big-heartedness, and sanguine optimism. It's not uncommon to hear mobilizers say that God has special purposes for the college-aged generation because they are poised to accomplish great things for God in their sold-out love for Him. Plus, those in their college years haven't supposedly hardened up from too much theology or the pessimism that comes with age. They are not restricted to marriage and family life, and they are free to love God fully and to carry on Christ's mission of love and justice to the world's oppressed. They can change the world. They must only unite, catalyze, synergize, and be released into the harvest.

To some, such words might sound inspiring and purpose-filled. That's understandable, especially since doing radical things for God are much more exhilarating than the weekly "Johnny-be-good" moralisms they learned in children's church and youth group. Instead of trying just to be better themselves, they now can launch into the world and redirect their efforts to make the world better. Instead of hearing weekly versions of how to love their neighbor (i.e., "obey your parents," "share with your sister," "mind to your teacher"), they now can enact real change with their life—"incarnate the love of Christ for their global neighbor whom they've never met before in the slums of some distant country." It's much easier to show your love for God

by loving your neighbor seven thousand miles away than seven feet down the hall in an adjacent bedroom. Catalyzing global movements is so much sexier and surely more pleasing to God than quietly doing the dishes, caring for your depressed family member, and awkwardly trying to live the gospel so your comfortable suburban coworker will ask you about the hope you have. You don't want to waste your life by settling for second best. Your fear of missing out on God's best drives your anxious activism. You want to make a difference. If you want to show God how much you love Him, you must surrender all to show the world the love of God.

Conflating the Great Commandment and the Great Commission

After undergoing an intensive ordination process, completing a PhD in two diverse disciplines, and almost two decades of Great Commission service, only then did I begin to see how frequently Christians (and especially Great Commission servants) confuse biblical precepts and biblical promises. Only then did I realize how deadening it was to my soul to misunderstand and misapply the law of God and the gospel of God. Many presume the law is relegated to the Ten Commandments (specifically for OT Israel), while the gospel comprises the teachings of Christ to show us how to live a life of abundance and love for God (specifically for the NT church). And so, the popular notion proposes that the Great Commission and the Great

Commandment are two sides to the same proverbial coin.

The way Christians supposedly fulfill the Great Commission, therefore, is by transforming the world with the love of God in every sphere of society. And the way Christians truly love God and others is by living missionally, which means incarnating the gospel, which means being the face of Christ, which means pursuing love and justice, which means building Christ's kingdom, which means loving on the least of these, which means engaging this cultural moment, which means leaning into the heart of Jesus for the world, which means... I don't think anyone really knows. But such sloppy jargon and sappy sentiments inspire activist laptop-warriors, hot-selling Christian best-sellers, multi-million-dollar conferences, and niche-marketed Christian experts to peddle their relics that have rock-your-world impact. Many evangelical thought-leaders have amalgamated the empathetic niceness of the Great Commandment with the be-a-blessing-activism of the Great Commission. This grafting has not produced the distinctive spiritual fruit that the big evangelical industrial complex has guaranteed.

The bottom line is this: The Great Commandment—love God and love others perfectly and perpetually—sums up all the law and the prophets. Essentially, the law of God is anything in the Bible where blessings, reward, and life are conditioned upon perfect and perpetual holiness that is explicitly required, suggested, implied, or assumed. And for those who don't know the law from Scripture, it

is any moral code written on the human conscience that corresponds to God's standards of impeccable and infinite righteousness. Only by keeping this moral code fully and forever without one infraction and unholy inclination can we earn righteousness and have a ground on which to stand acceptable in God's sight. And no, God does not grade on a curve because "He knows our heart." That He knows our heart is actually terrifying news. Indeed, God expects us to be perfect as He is perfect. Yet, it takes no developmental psychologist to admit the universal human problem: there is none righteous, not even one.

The good news of the gospel is that the righteous Man anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures has come, has obeyed God's law perfectly, and has suffered the consequences of the law in place of all sinners who will receive Him. And He was raised from the dead for our justification. Having been justified through faith, recipients of such grace have peace with God. So, now, out of gratitude, the grace-endowed church labors in the Great Commission to announce to all the nations that the God-Man from Galilee has fulfilled the impossible demands of the law written on everyone's conscience. He has satisfied the wrath of God against law-breakers. And this announcement is a message of free grace for any who would receive it. There are no covenant stipulations or contractual conditions. All that is required of recipients? Nothing. The only thing we can give God is our debt. He pays the bill, but we have thereafter no debtor's ethic. No paying back God. No obedience to maintain favor. So, the Great Commission is the glad-hearted charge

to take that marvelous message to the nations and to make disciples who rest in grace through Word and worship.

Obeying the Gospel?

What about the biblical command to “obey the gospel” (cf. Romans 10:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17)? Surely, obedience is essential, right? Yes, in the sense that wherever Paul talks about obeying the gospel, he is referring to the biblical response to the gospel call, which is believe. After feeding the crowds with bread, Jesus said, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give to you....’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.... Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’” (John 6:27–29, 33). God requires faith alone to receive the Bread of Life.

The Great Commission is not organically fused to the Great Commandment, wherein we can use imprecise, creative slogans and indistinguishably mix them. The Great Commandment demands perfect obedience to the law, which only Christ was able to fulfill. And the gospel is the announcement of the good news that law-breakers can be pardoned and counted as law-keepers through faith alone. And in light of such good news, the King of the commission charges His servants to train up disciples who dissem-

inate and defend this good news. They are to “guard the deposit” (1 Timothy 6:20). As God placed Adam in the garden to cultivate and guard it (cf. Genesis 2:15), so the Last Adam cultivates and guards His global church through His Great Commission servants. It is a joyful work that requires sword and trowel.

Evangelicals as Co-Redemptrix?

Protestants have historically rejected the medieval Roman Catholic Church’s notion of Mary as co-redemptrix—cooperating and participating in Christ’s redemptive work. But ironically, this seems to be the modern evangelical church’s popular opinion of itself. It’s the view that the church cooperates with Christ in saving the world by transforming it through loving God and others. This is an error of the most egregious kind. This propensity emerges from combining the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. And in the process, the gospel gets squeezed out. There is no good news in this system. It creates new laws that exhaust the saints, confuse the lost, and poison the gospel.

In the decades of my missionary service, I have seen utter devastation in the wake of Christian leaders who don’t hold to the doctrines of the absolute sovereignty of God, original sin, and justification by faith alone. And I have witnessed the wreckage of lives bulldozed by a prophetic mysticism, the flattening of distinct masculinity and femininity, critical theory’s woke religiosity, spiritually abusive