

What is a “Great Commission” Church?

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples in Galilee, the place that had been the primary site of His public ministry. Nineteen of His 32 parables and 25 of His 33 miracles were taught and performed in Galilee. It was here that Jesus chose to give His disciples, and us, the mandate for the future ministry of the church. We have come to call this mandate the Great Commission.

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20 ESV

The Great Commission is not the suggestion of Jesus for how to have an effective ministry. It is His command. Every church and every follower of Jesus has been given the same purpose, to finish the Great Commission. It is the responsibility of every pastor to lead his church to be a Great Commission church. If a church is not actively and intentionally pursuing the Great Commission, it really has no reason to exist. Those churches that are committed to completing this directive from Jesus have been given a promise. Jesus said, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20). In other words, Jesus is saying that this mandate, this Commission, will not change. It will continue until “the end of the age,” and, if a church is committed to the Great Commission, Jesus has promised to be with that church. Every pastor wants the presence of Jesus in his church. The abiding presence of Jesus is only guaranteed to those churches that are committed to completing the Great Commission. This fact brings up the question, “How do we engage the Great Commission?” How do you lead your church to pursue the purpose given to it by Jesus?”

Jesus did not leave us to guess the answer to this question. Jesus, in His very last statement to His followers before He ascended into heaven, told us how to finish the purpose He had given us:

⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:8 ESV

Jesus told us that the Great Commission would not be fulfilled by our own power, but by the power of His Spirit. He then told us what we are to do with that power. We are to be His “witnesses.” In the original language in which this was written, the word used for “witnesses” is the word from which we get our word, “martyr,” which describes someone who gives their entire life for a purpose, or cause, even to the point of dying for it. Jesus is saying that He will give us the power to live out the purpose He has given us, but we must be committed to giving our lives to this Great Commission. The power Jesus gives us to pursue His purpose is in proportion to our commitment to complete that purpose. His presence and His power abide with those churches sold out to the pursuit of the Great Commission.

What exactly does that look like? Jesus gave us the plan by which we must carry out the purpose He has given His church. We must be His “witnesses” in the 4 areas that Jesus identified as the focus of a Great Commission Church:

1. **“...in Jerusalem” ...Tell Your Story.** Jerusalem was the place the church was birthed. It was where the people of the first church lived their everyday lives. It was in Jerusalem that the first followers of Jesus began sharing their story of their encounter with Jesus.

In fact, appearing before the council in Jerusalem, Peter and John astonished their accusers with their boldness. The scripture says, “And they (the counsel) recognized that they had been with Jesus.” (Acts 4:13). Peter and John, along with the others who started the first church, were boldly recounting the story of their encounter with Jesus throughout Jerusalem. The pursuit of the Great Commission begins with the story of your encounter with Jesus. The sharing of your story transcends the intellectual activity of a memorized approach to witnessing. Your story is your passion. The sharing of your story as you live your everyday life changes the lives of those who hear it and begins your journey to complete the Great Commission.

Please take note of the information provided in this folder to equip you to help the followers of Jesus in your church tell their stories. No church can say it is a Great Commission church until

the people of that church are committed to personal evangelism in their everyday lives, going about telling the story of their encounter with Jesus. **It must be their passion.**

2. **“...and in all Judea”...Engage your Community.** As the first church began to expand, the first followers of Jesus were not only passionate about sharing the story of their encounter with Jesus, but were committed to taking the gospel into their community, the area known as Judea. Judea, the region surrounding Jerusalem extending to the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, was the cultural community in which the first church was begun. As plainly as possible, in the Great Commission, Jesus said that we must “go.” The book of Acts, which chronicles the church’s first expansion in the world, begins with the church going to its community. The spread of the first church was driven by the first followers of Jesus telling their stories of their encounter with Jesus and meeting the needs of the people of Judea. “And with great power the Apostles were giving their testimony (sharing their story)...There was not a needy person among them...it was distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:33-35). The first church was not only committed to meeting the physical needs of the people in its community, Judea, but also meeting their spiritual needs. “The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem (Judea), bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.” (Acts 5:16). A Great Commission church is committed to engaging its community with the gospel.

To assist your church in this next step of pursuing the Great Commission, you will find in this folder information regarding what we call the Lifeproject. The Lifeproject involves a simple 4-step process by which you can lead your church to engage its community and infuse the LIFE of Jesus into your church’s community:

- L - Look at your community.**
- I - Identify the groups in your community.**
- F - Focus on those groups with which your church has an affinity.**
- E - Engage your community by engaging those groups that your church has an affinity to reach.**

A Great Commission church realizes that it exists not for itself, but to “go” with the message of the gospel into its community and beyond.

3. **“...and Samaria”...Plant a Church.** The distance between Jerusalem, the birth place of the church, and Samaria is only 35 miles in a direct line, but the distance between the people of Jerusalem and the people of Samaria, culturally, was too large to be measured. Historically, there was a contempt between the people of Judea and Samaria that had existed for years. As the first church began to implement the Great Commission, they soon found themselves realizing that the “going” of the Great Commission required them to carry the Good News of Jesus to people that were not like themselves and that included the Samaritans, those that they viewed as outside their traditional camp. While the Samaritans claimed to worship the same God as the Jewish people from whom Jesus had come, they were different in style and focus. They did not even use the same temple or building that the Jewish people used. Yet, the early church accepted its responsibility to pursue the Great Commission by carrying the Good News of Jesus even to the Samaritans, and the Samaritans responded readily to the gospel. In Acts 8, we are told that the followers of Jesus began to disperse into Samaria. The scripture tells us, “And...they...testified (told the stories of their encounter with Jesus)...preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.” (Acts 8:25). As they preached, the results were astounding. The first church began to spawn other churches as it continued the “going” of the Great Commission. As the first church multiplied, it launched the first church planting initiative. “The church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up...it multiplied.” (Acts 9:31). The church unselfishly moved into the unfamiliar territory of Samaria, planting churches among those who were culturally different.

A Great Commission church is not a selfish church. It recognizes that it does not exist simply for the benefits of its own members, but to reach out to those who are culturally different. There may be differences in worship styles or even in dress. Cultural differences may be ethnic, socio-economic, or even different generations of people who do not share our preferences for music. It is still the responsibility of a Great Commission church to “go” to those people. The first church engaged in the practice of planting churches among those that were culturally diverse, a practice that must be embraced by every Great Commission church. A Great Commission church refuses to be held captive by the preferences of its own members.

Material is included in this folder to help you lead your church in the next step of being a Great Commission church, the unselfish practice of planting another church. This church plant can be done in a place that is geographically or culturally detached from your church, as Samaria was on both counts to the first church. **Every church should plant a church to continue carrying out the purpose of the church to fulfill the Great Commission.** Information is provided here to connect you with those people, classes, and materials to help your church become the unselfish church Jesus meant it to be by planting a church to reach those that would not necessarily come to your church, for cultural or geographic reasons.

4. **“...and to the end of the earth”...Penetrate the Darkness.** Jesus wanted His followers to understand that the gospel was for everyone and that the pursuit of the Great Commission meant that a Great Commission church must be willing to carry the gospel to the darkest of places. For the first church, this meant carrying the good news of Jesus to those that were completely detached from the people of God, people known as the Gentiles. Unlike the Samaritans who at least claimed to worship the same God as the Jews, the Gentiles had no such inclination. They lived in such darkness that they were given the nickname “dogs” by the Jewish people. The first

church found itself embroiled in a controversy over whether or not the gospel was even applicable to those who had lived in such darkness. The Great Commission prevailed in that controversy.

The mandate given to the church by Jesus to be “witnesses” “to the end of the earth” has historically been viewed in the context of geography. We have often thought of “the end of the earth” as the place of greatest darkness that involves the least accessible parts of our planet. We have told ourselves that is where to find those who live in the greatest darkness regarding the gospel. In the phrase Jesus used in Acts 1:8 “...the end of the earth,” the word “end” in the original language in which this was written refers to a period of time, not a location. Our word eschatology, which refers to a branch of theology that studies the last days of the earth and the human race, comes from this word. The first church understood this. In Acts 11, it is apparent that it was not the geographical location of the people to whom the gospel was to be taken that challenged the first church, it was who these people were. To them “the end of the earth” was represented by the Gentiles. The entire second half of the book of Acts chronicles the call of Paul and his ministry extending the reach of the church to penetrate the darkness “to the end of the earth,” the Gentiles. As Paul and Barnabus told the people of Antioch, quoting Isaiah 49:6, “For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have made your light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’” (Acts 13:47). The “Gentiles are equated with “the ends of the earth” in both the Old Testament and Paul’s quoting of that passage. Once again, the word used for “ends” in the verse can refer to a period of time or to those who live in that period. In other words, “the last ones.” I believe that Jesus wasn’t just meaning to represent the geography of darkness, but the social nature of darkness as well. It is possible for “the end of the earth” today to be right at our back door, for the “last ones” to be closer to us than we realize.

With the growth of the internet, social media, and other technological means of communication, our world is becoming much more accessible. In fact, the cultural distinctives that

have identified various people groups in the past are rapidly dissolving. Young people in various cultures around the world, because of the technological connectivity of our world, have more in common with each other than with the culture of their parents. This phenomenon has caused us to redefine “the end of the earth.” Ninety-five percent of the 12-24 year olds in our world today do not know Jesus and represent the darkest generation that the human race has ever produced. For the church to pursue the Great Commission, it must penetrate the darkness of this 12-24 window, no matter where the young people are located geographically. This step of the implementation of the Great Commission involves the church engaging, with the gospel, the 12-24 year old students to whom it has access. The church must reach out to “the last ones.”

Materials are provided in this folder to help your church reach the 12-24 year olds that represent “the end of the earth” for our churches today. We would encourage you to start a 12-24 team in your church that directly interacts with the regional 12-24 team responsible for implementing the intentional evangelistic strategy for your region. Information in this folder also addresses how your church can call a CMI (Campus Missionary Intern), with our assistance, to help your church pursue the Great Commission to “the end of the earth” by engaging the local middle school, high school, or college campuses near your church.

Jesus told His followers, “**Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.**” (Matthew 4:19 ESV). If we are willing to acknowledge Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16) and to carry that message to the world as we pursue the Great Commission, Jesus has promised “**I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**” (Matthew 16:18)

A Great Commission church is an unstoppable church. Let’s don’t build an organization. Let’s start a movement. That is what Great Commission churches do!