

The Great Commission (1)

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[0 : 00] Please turn again with me this morning to Matthew chapter 28 and from verse 16 to 20. The Reverend R. Reverend J.S. Stewart was a minister in Edinburgh in the mid-20th century.

Most famous for his book *Man in Christ*, I recently acquired a copy of another of his books, *His Strong Name*. *His Strong Name* is a compilation of some of the sermons that Reverend Stewart preached.

I was especially struck by one he preached from John chapter 20 verse 20 which reads, Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Let me read you the first two sentences of Stewart's sermon on John 20.

20. This broken, warring world is living on the wrong side of Easter Day. That is the basic fact and the source of all our troubles.

I was utterly intrigued by what he said. This broken, warring world is living on the wrong side of Easter Day.

[1 : 21] Yes, Reverend Stewart, but could it not also be that this weakened, apathetic church is also living on the wrong side of Easter Day?

Could that be the source of many, if not all of our troubles? That we're living on the wrong side of Easter Day. Well, okay, for as true as that may be, what would it look like for our church to live on the right side of Easter Day?

To live in the full, glaring, dazzling radiance of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ? Well, let me suggest that, among many other things, living on the right side of Easter Day would fill us with a fresh enthusiasm for the great commission our Lord has set before us, which is to make disciples for him of all nations.

A church which lives in the full, glaring, and dazzling radiance of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ engages in radical mission.

A church living on the wrong side of Easter is timid, cowardly, and unimaginative. A church living on the right side of Easter is courageous, bold, and faithful to the call of our Lord to go and make disciples.

[2 : 45] Well, over the course of the next couple of Sunday mornings, I want us to close off our studies in the Gospel of Matthew by examining what it would mean for us as Glasgow City Free Church to live on the right side of Easter Day.

To live in the full, glaring, and dazzling radiance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Namely, what it would mean for us to engage in radical mission.

This is, after all, where we are in Matthew 28, 16 through 20, with Jesus and his disciples on an unspecified hill in Galilee. In somewhat of a touch of psychological brilliance in verse 17, we read, And when they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted.

Matthew doesn't go into details, but even now, with the risen Lord Jesus before their very eyes, some of the disciples are still doubtful.

How true to our psychology as Christians that even when the strongest evidence is presented to us, we still doubt. I wonder whether they then, at that point, were living on the wrong side of Easter Day.

[4 : 08] That some of them, at least, were still timid, cowardly, and unimaginative. But then Jesus opens his mouth, and he overwhelms their doubt.

The risen Jesus opens his mouth, and his word repositions them on the right side of Easter Day. He says, You know, sometimes when it comes to these famous words, We're in too much of a hurry to get to the imperatives, the making disciples, the going, the teaching.

That we ignore the indicatives, the power and the presence of the risen Jesus with us as we go and do these things for him. The legalist within us wants to find commands to obey before it finds gospel truths in which to find motive and strength.

You know, if we are to be the church that God wants us to be, a church which lives in the full, glaring, and dazzling radiance of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, a church which lives on the right side of Easter Day and engages in radical mission, then we need to slow down with what Jesus says here.

And first of all, find our strength and our motive in the risen Christ's gospel promises. You will notice in these verses that the central command of Jesus to make disciples is bracketed on either side by two great gospel pillars, two great gospel indicatives.

[6 : 12] In the first instance, the power of Jesus, where he says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. And secondly, the presence of Jesus.

And behold, I'm with you always, even to the end of the age. A church which lives on the right side of Easter engages in radical mission on the basis of these true great gospel pillars, the power and the presence of Jesus.

That's what I want us to get to as Glasgow City Free Church. That on the basis of the power and the presence of Jesus, we are courageous, we are bold, and we are faithful in the greatest of all missions, to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

That on the basis of these gospel pillars, the can't do, won't work attitude of a church which lives on the wrong side of Easter will be replaced with a can do, let's try it, enthusiasm and excitement of a church which lives on the right side of Easter.

So let's start then with the first of these promises. First of these pillars. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

[7 : 33] All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Now, whenever we're reading Matthew's gospel from the very beginning to the very end, we need to remember it was written first to first century Jewish Christians who were being persecuted for their faith by their fellow Jewish countrymen.

So Matthew himself, a Jew, is writing to Jews and he's writing from a Jewish perspective using words and ideas Jews would have readily identified with.

That's why, for example, in this gospel, Jesus' favourite self title is the Son of Man. A title to which the Jews, Matthew was writing, would have known was a reference to how the Old Testament referred to the Messiah.

You will know that the title Son of Man is taken from Daniel's vision in Daniel 7.13 where we read these words, I saw in the night visions and behold, with the clouds of heaven there come one like a Son of Man and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him.

Such a mysterious vision. But the Jews of Matthew's day knew that the Son of Man pointed to Jesus as the Messiah of Daniel 7, separate from God but also mysteriously identified with him.

[9 : 06] So that's why Jesus calls himself so often in Matthew Son of Man to point to his divine identity, Israel's Christ, Israel's King.

But Daniel's vision of the Son of Man being presented to the Ancient of Days does not end in Daniel 7.13. It proceeds in Daniel 7.14 with the words, To him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom is one that shall not be destroyed. It is this prophetic vision of Daniel which I want to suggest to you was front and centre of Jesus' mind when in Matthew 28.18 he prefaces the Great Commission with the words, All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

The risen Messiah, having been presented before the Ancient of Days, his Father, has been given dominion, glory and a kingdom.

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him by his Father, the Ancient of Days. Now the Jews to whom Matthew wrote this letter would probably have understood very well the Old Testament foundations of the Great Commission preface.

[10 : 40] That the divine Son of Man has been given all authority by his Father. It is not as if the church is to engage in the Great Commission to extend the authority of Christ.

Because the risen Christ already has all authority in heaven and on earth. It is more that the church is to engage in the Great Commission in order to declare the universal authority of Christ.

that although Christ may not be worshipped as Lord by the Gentile nations, yet the Lord he is. Let's never fall into the trap of thinking that somehow whereas Jesus might be the Lord of Scotland, he's not Lord in other parts of the world.

And that the reason we engage in the Great Commission is to make him Lord there. In 1969, Neil Armstrong was the first human being to walk on the surface of the moon.

One of the first things he and his colleagues did was to plant a United States flag on the moon. Doubtless motivated by Cold War politics as it's as if they were claiming the moon for America.

[11 : 55] Although let's be charitable and say they were claiming it for all humanity. Matthew 28, 18 is telling us and listen up, listen good. There is nowhere where you can go in heaven or on earth where Jesus has not already planted his flag of ownership saying, this too is mine.

This too is mine. The world was a big and dangerous place for the Christians of Matthew's day. There were barbarian tribes and Roman legions.

there were parched deserts. There were deadly animals. There were stormy seas. I know about it all. Jesus has authority. Nor the barbarian tribes of Gaul do not know Jesus.

But Jesus is Lord of Gaul. And so when these first Christian missionaries went to proclaim the gospel, they were going to nations where Jesus had already planted the flag.

in old maps, unknown and uncharted waters were often described by cartographers with the words, there be monsters here.

[13 : 16] Well, according to this preface to the Great Commission, unknown and uncharted peoples and nations are described with the words, Jesus is Lord here also.

You can't go anywhere. where Jesus is not Lord and where he has not already placed the flag of his kingly authority.

There's no person in this world over whom Jesus does not have authority. This is why it's so important that before we enter into the imperatives, the commands of the Great Commission, we understand its indicatives, its promises.

In particular, this emphasis on the universal authority of Christ Jesus gives us the mandate to go and the confidence to succeed.

Some people, even Christians, want to dissuade us from missionary work. Why can't you leave people to believe what they want to believe? So they were born in India.

[14 : 19] Let them be Hindus. They were born in Saudi Arabia. Let them be Muslims. Leave them alone. Yes, but this verse is telling us that Jesus is Lord in India today and in Saudi Arabia today, not the pantheon of Hindu gods in India, nor the God of Islam in Saudi Arabia.

Jesus is Lord in these places also. These early Jewish Christians lived at a time when all authority and power on earth was claimed by the Romans.

the Romans had the power of life and death and the power of allegiance was absolute. All the more reason surely to keep quiet about one's Christian faith and not make more disciples for Jesus.

Surely it's very dangerous to engage with the Great Commission and share the good news of Jesus. Well, dangerous it might be. And yet these early Christians needed to understand something as do we today.

Rome's great power is not absolute. For Jesus has all authority in heaven and earth over them. In the same way, think of the great philosophies and religions of our day which stand opposed to the Christian faith.

[15 : 50] Their power power is not absolute. Secular materialism is not absolute. Compartment religion is not absolute.

Identity politics is not absolute. In my home village, because of storms in the past, there were great sea walls erected to keep out the sea.

Do we honestly think that these great philosophies and religions of our day which stand opposed to the lordship of Jesus Christ can keep him out?

My home village now, arguably because of climate change, during the season of storms, the sea regularly overwhelmed the defences which are set against it and floods the houses and streets of the village.

same is true for the gospel. Jesus and his authority lovingly subdues and overwhelms all opposition.

[16 : 55] Now, you may criticize this as being, well, Calvinist and reformed in one's approach to the Great Commission. I would suggest that on the basis of this verse, to believe in the universal

lordship of Jesus, that he's planted his flag everywhere.

is more biblical than anything else. No nation to which we take the gospel will keep Jesus out forever.

His authority is absolute and he already has his flag of ownership planted there. The Christian who's engaging in missions, whether it's William Burns in China, Adoniram Judson in Burma, or whoever, they are not stepping into the unknown, rather, they're further exploring the boundaries of Christ's universal lordship.

Now, if we're assured of that, of the universal power and authority of Jesus over all people, in all places, at all times, then surely we can be bolder with our proclamation of the gospel and confident in the task Jesus has given us to make disciples for him.

Think of someone in your life, someone that you love, who is consistently dismissive of the gospel you're sharing with them. The risen Jesus has authority over them and their hearts, and in the twinkling of an eye, he can open their ears to the gospel and change their heart.

[18:30] Or think of a people group in the world who you consider to be hardened to the gospel. The risen Jesus has authority over them, and in an instant, he can send his spirit to effect a mighty work of transformation among those very people.

He's done it countless times through history. He's doing it today among people and in places like Central Asia, or even 10 years ago, we could not have believed such a thing was possible. Jesus has planted his flag of authority on the ground of every heart, of every person, in every place. There is no unknown territory for us here, and for as many monsters as might be there, Jesus has authority over them as well. Let this give us boldness and confidence in obeying the great commission of Jesus, that the divine son of man has all authority in heaven and on earth. The power of Jesus, that's the first great gospel pillar upon which the great commission is founded. The second is the presence of Jesus, the presence of Jesus, and to behold, I am with you always to the end of the age.

[20:01] Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. Remember those to whom Matthew was writing this gospel were ethnic Jews, and as such, they were very familiar with the history of their own people.

The first foundation upon which the great commission is based comes from Daniel 7, and Daniel's vision of the universal dominion of the Messiah. The second foundation of the great commission is based, I want to suggest, upon Joshua chapter 1, and its description of God's command to Joshua to enter in and take possession of the promised land.

In Joshua chapter 1 and verse 2, God speaks to Joshua and says, Moses, my servant is dead. Now, therefore, go, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel.

Go. But that's not going to be an easy thing to do. The land God promised to the people of Israel was already inhabited by hostile peoples.

There was much of which to be apprehensive and very afraid. Listen to the promise of God in Joshua chapter 1, verse 5. No man shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life.

[21:28] Just as I was with Moses, so will I be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous. Joshua and all his people are to be strong and courageous in the knowledge that no human being, no indigenous hostile tribe will be able to stand up against them.

And why is that? It's because God will go with them. God will never leave them. God will never forsake them. God had already placed his flag of ownership upon the land of Canaan and now he promises that he'll be with his people as they march in to take possession of that which he has given them by promise.

He will be with them. He will fight for them and fight with them and before them. He will protect them from defeat at the hands of their enemies and ensure that their mission is finally successful.

This is the Old Testament background which I want to suggest to you was at the front of Jesus' mind when he said to the disciples in verse 20, and behold I'm with you always to the very end of the age.

just as he was with the people of Israel as they crossed the Jordan on dry land and entered into the promised land, so he will be with us as we engage in this great commission of making disciples of all the nations, of subduing the hostility of the peoples to Jesus through the proclamation of the love of God demonstrated on the cross of Christ.

[23 : 10] He was with the people of Israel as they set foot into the Jordan. He was with them in all the battles they fought. He was with them as they prayed to him for success.

And in the same way he's with us in all our going out for him. He's with us in our failures and in our successes. He's with us in our uptimes and our downs.

He's with us in our tears of sadness. And our tears of joy. He knows when the message we have proclaimed has been rejected. And he rejoices when the message we have proclaimed has been believed.

Many of us were brought up watching the British comedy Blackadder. For those of you who want to know what British human is, I'm thinking here mainly of our American friends.

Watch the Blackadder box sets. Then you'll get it. The most thinky of the Blackadder seasons is Blackadder Goes Forth, where Edmund Blackadder plays a weary, cynical officer in the trenches of the Western Front in World War I.

[24 : 29] And at one stage, Blackadder is visited by the general of his division, played by the excellent Stephen Fry. General Melchett, as he is, tells Blackadder that he has planned a new innovative offensive against the German lines, which will be comprised of the all too predictable tactic of walking slowly along across no man's land.

Melchett then claps Blackadder on the back and says to him, some of you may die, an understatement, some of you may die, but don't worry, old boy, I'm right behind you.

To which Edmund Blackadder whispers under his breath, yes, about five miles behind me, I suspect. The reason that Blackadder Goes Forth is so thinky, it's so poignant, that the generals drank brandy five miles behind the front line while their troops were slaughtered in no man's land. You know, Jesus never says to his disciples, I'm right behind you as you go into the most hostile areas of the planet to preach to the most hostile people on the planet the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that under their breath they whisper to themselves, yes, and I guess around five miles behind me, I suspect.

Rather, Jesus is with them as they get up out of their trenches and make their way toward the enemy. Yes, his flag is even placed in no man's land and in their trenches also.

[26 : 08] He's with them in their hearts and in their minds, in their thoughts and in their emotions. He's with them in their living and as we saw on Friday, he's even with them when they're dying.

The Christian who engages in the great commission of Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations does not go alone. For the Lord, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given, the great God of heaven and earth goes with her.

Jesus was with those first Scottish missionaries who sailed from our shores and landed in the beaches of Kenya. He was with Hudson Taylor as he left the safety of the coastal Chinese cities and ventured inland.

He was with Henry Martin as he proclaimed the gospel to the hostile Muslims of Central Asia. He is with his people as they make disciples for him, whoever they are and whoever they are working among.

There is no difference between the people of Israel as they marched into Canaan and Hudson Taylor as he traveled to inland China. These are the indicatives of the great commission.

[27 : 31] There is nowhere you can go and there is no one to whom you may speak over whom Jesus is not Lord. There is nowhere you can go and there is no one to whom you may speak where Jesus is not with you.

There is no no man's land for you to march into. There are no monsters in uncharted places which the gospel doesn't know about or hasn't already overcome.

This is what it means for a church to live on the right side of Easter Day. In the dazzling realization of the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a church delivered from the apathy, timidity and cowardice and unimaginative ness.

A church which is emboldened by the power of Jesus and the presence of Jesus. Well on the basis of all that we've seen from these verses are you ready to go?

Are you ready to make disciples for Jesus Christ? A church which lives on the right side of Easter engages in radical mission on the basis of these two great gospel pillars, the power and the presence of Jesus.

[28 : 52] That's where we all want to get to surely as Glasgow City Free Church. They're on the basis of the power and the presence of Jesus. We are courageous, we are bold, we are faithful, we

are inventive and passionate about the greatest of all missions.

To make disciples of all nations for Christ Jesus, yes even disciples in our city and of our city. That on the basis of these great gospel pillars, the historic Free Church attitude of can't do, won't work. That attitude of a church which lives on the wrong side of Easter Day will be replaced by the can-do, let's-give-it-a-go enthusiasm and excitement of a church which lives on the right side of Easter Day. Now all that's left is for us to obey our Lord and to go and make disciples of all nations as we pray together. Forgive us Lord for limiting your Lordship, for thinking that somehow, well you may be Lord here in Scotland or you may not be, but you're definitely not Lord in Saudi Arabia or in India, places that are deeply hostile to the gospel.

Father we thank you that you've placed your flag of ownership among every people, among every tribe, among every nation. There's nowhere you're not Lord. It's that we're going there to proclaim your Lordship.

[30 : 27] Father we thank you that wherever we go, we go with you. You'll never leave us, you'll never abandon us. We think of the great missionary from, not far from where we're all positioned here in Glasgow, John G. Payton, who when he went to the New Hebrides, his wife and his children died.

And many people said to him, why, why did you do that? For what purpose was all that? And, and, and was Jesus not with you there?

Lord we thank you that you surely saw the pain of your servant John G. Payton and blessed his ministry. We thank you that you see, oh Lord, our passion for the gospel.

Surely you shall bless it. Be with us then Lord we ask, bless us all, bless Glasgow, in Jesus name. Amen.