

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Lamb, Roger (2010) "The Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission," *Leaven*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol18/iss2/8>

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The Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission

ROGER LAMB

Something in the human DNA drives us to admire greatness. It is no wonder when we realize the greatness of the Creator. God has blessed humans with the desire to change the world around us and the ability to discern the priorities needed to take on that noble task. Of course, being humans of free will, we have alternately honored God with those gifts and distorted them to our shame. We strive for the greatness of curing cancer as we scurry about worshipping celebrity idols and performing unfathomable acts of corporate and personal violence. Our relationship with our Creator is the great drama of this world.

In writing the scripts of our lives, we have long sought the core of the eternal plot. What is most important? What is the greatest? God doesn't leave us hanging waiting for a panel of judges, call-in vote or even Oprah.

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

Listen to the greatest commandment as recorded by Mark.

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions (Mark 12.28–34).

Jesus did not rebuke the man for asking about the greatest commandment. Even though he knew this was a bit of a theological game, he engaged the conversation and quoted scripture. The story quickly turned from the teacher of the law testing Jesus, to Jesus evaluating the teacher's proximity to the kingdom.

This greatest commandment and its great corollary embody the message of all scripture. They are at once exhilarating, compelling and challenging. Herein resides the secret to changing the world and to setting priorities for life. Loving God cannot merely be reduced to religion and tradition. Loving God is an all-in deal giving my heart (emotions), my soul (spiritual), my mind (intellect) and my strength (body). What's my motivation? When I survey the wondrous cross and the empty tomb, "love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

One trait that distinguishes Jesus from the massive cast of all humanity is his life lived completely according to his convictions. This undeniable life empowers him to call us to follow in his steps beyond a theoretical Sunday school discussion to a daily walk in his challenging footsteps:

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels" (Luke 9.23–26).

The false resolution of the tomb was triumphed by the most unique climax ever: the resurrection. Even before it occurred, Jesus invited us to shoot our own sequel to his death, burial and resurrection, with him as the author of our faith and director of our action.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

With this backdrop and character development, the grand conclusion of Jesus' life on earth leaves us awestruck, purpose-driven and single-minded. His parting soliloquy draws us into his vision and passion to sacrifice so that others may live the same high drama of forgiveness and mission.

Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28.18–20 NLV).

Jesus was not just a celebrity or a classic movie that we ceremoniously view repeatedly for inspiration, entertainment or ritual. His life and teachings were intended to be the ultimate original model for the screenplay of our lives. This is now God working through his devoted followers to change the lives of people throughout the world with their own crosses and resurrections. Here is the freedom from the chain of sin and suffering that plagues humans in the quagmire of our nature. Once I have been set free, I can help produce a different ending to the stories of multitudes who can pay it forward forever.

THE GREATS INTERTWINED

One of the great challenges with "the greatest story ever told" is familiarity that leads to disconnection, tradition and even contempt. Do we just leave our Sunday a.m. theater as paying customers critiquing the sets, the score and the performances, or are we compelled into the power of the story to become an integral part of the drama? Are we critics debating the merits of the Greatest Commandment versus the Great Commission as mere plot points? Or are we fully engaged in taking God's direction through every aspect of our life? Do we ever participate in another person's conversion? If not, how can we even understand the meaning?

Some have argued whether the Great Commandment or the Great Commission is the more important. This is akin to a fruitless debate over which of the godhead is supreme. How can you separate them? This not an either/or discussion; it is a both/and. The author and "perfecter" of our faith spoke both of them as commands.

When I love God with all of my heart, soul, mind and strength, how can I but go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey? How can I say I love God this completely and do nothing to make disciples of others? Some have said that if we just love God, everything else will fall into place. My

first ministry mentor wholeheartedly agreed with the Greatest Commandment. When I asked him why we didn't baptize more people in a 1000-member church, he replied that our mission was to keep the saved *saved*. He also counseled me not to get close to more than three couples in the congregation. Two of the deacons on my youth ministry committee wound up divorced and no one knew they were even having problems. With the Great Commission, Jesus makes loving God intentional and directional. When we write a different script we produce a different movie.

Many followers of Christ have wrestled with this tension. The International Churches of Christ (ICOC) have an interesting and valuable history worth viewing. This is the history I know best. But first, let me set the context for my understanding of the history of the ICOC by telling my own story.

My great-grandfather was a circuit preacher for Churches of Christ in central Illinois, and from 1894–1898 preached for the same church in Charleston, Illinois, that I preached for in the 1970s. I was blessed to meet my wonderful wife while we were both students at Harding College where we participated in Campaigns Northeast four summers in a row, knocking doors and studying the Bible with people six days a week. In 1966 I attended a Campus Evangelism seminar in Dallas, Texas, looking for inspiration and vision to change the world with the gospel. Immediately after college I served as the youth minister for the Memorial Church of Christ in Houston, Texas, which sent us to the mission field of Charleston, Illinois. In the mid 1970s I found myself trying to figure out how to evangelize Illinois and the Midwest.

It seemed that a multitude of the Churches of Christ and the Christian Churches were engaged in this quest. I attended workshops, conferences and seminars in numerous places focusing on evangelism, bus ministry, campus ministry, etc., with one or both of our elders. Our little church doubled in size to 120 when we started reaching out to college students. I believed that if we just loved God, people would naturally be drawn to us and become Christians. However, it quickly became apparent that something was wrong. The lives of our members were not really changing. When the students left school for the summer or after graduation, few kept going to church. My conclusion was that we needed a campus minister. God used that subplot to show me that I needed the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission.

GOD'S GREAT HARVEST

The Crossroads Church of Christ in Gainesville, Florida, had been converting large numbers of students to Christ, training them and sending them out to lead campus ministries around the United States. Their emphasis was on a total commitment to God and to his plan. I had been following them through their bulletin for some time. After raising the funds for a campus minister and searching many other places, I called Chuck Lucas to see if he had anyone who would be interested in an interview. God brought us Kip McKean to lead the students. When I saw the radically changed lives of the students and the numerous new converts, I was convicted by my own lack of conviction concerning the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission. I had believed them in theory, but practiced neither as Jesus directed. I had three choices: run this guy out of town, leave or repent publicly—seeking “discipling” and surrendering to God to lead the way. Surrender was the only real option. In that little town, hundreds of college students and adults became Christians who made disciples of others, and many continue to do so even to this day.

The Boston Church of Christ took the Great Commission another step. While the Crossroads Church had a great vision for planting a campus ministry on every campus in the United States, the Boston Church envisioned making disciples “of all nations.” In a radical move of faith they began sending out mission teams to the major cities of the world. A huge cast of people from all sections of the Restoration Movement flocked into Boston, Chicago and other churches to learn how to make disciples. They trained alongside the vast numbers of those converted to Christ from all kinds of religious, atheist and agnostic backstories. God formed them into teams that built pillar churches in London, Paris, Hong Kong, Singapore, Toronto, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Johannesburg, Lagos, Nairobi, Moscow, Tokyo, Sydney and many more on every continent. Those churches trained new national converts, who planted new churches to evangelize their

regions of the world. The all-in love for God combined with the all-out passion for world evangelism exploded in just thirty years into the present 575 International Churches of Christ in 143 countries, with a membership just shy of 100,000.

GOD'S GREAT LESSONS

The great drama of the scriptures should prepare us for the plot twists and character arcs that go with our very human screenplay. But when we are writing our screenplay, we rarely see the holes in our plot. Gratefully for those of us in the grand scheme, the Great Director rewrites and reshoots—as painful as it is to our pride.

Our movement began with a healthy devotion to living out the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission. God blessed us with rapidly growing churches of all races in many large cities and campus towns across the United States. He blessed us with planting a racially mixed church in Johannesburg, South Africa, before the fall of apartheid, a church of young people in Moscow before the fall of communism, a church of 1,000 members in Hong Kong before the city was absorbed back into China and multitudes of other incredible stories of radical faith. As Director of Media for the ICOC, I was privileged to see many of these churches firsthand. Having spent my high school years in Germany, I was amazed at how these churches were planted in the key cities of every country, how they grew quickly with deep convictions about the simple, clear message of the gospel and how quickly strong local leaders were matured. The Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission came alive intertwined.

About the mid 1990s our story took a turn. For the sake of synopsis, we can make only a few observations. You can find more information in the resources listed at the end of this article.

The Greatest Commandment lost emphasis to the Great Commission. When we relied on God and knew we didn't know what were doing, God created incredible scenes of victories and changed lives. Once we thought we got the hang of it and took over the director's chair, things started falling apart. Emphasis grew onto our success instead of his. Here are some of the production errors I participated in from my point of view:

1. **Impatience:** We held onto our plans even when God was obviously showing us we needed to adapt them. We steadfastly held to man-made goals when we should have listened to the signs God was showing.
2. **No plan to mature:** Our Evangelization Proclamation plan (to plant churches in every country that had a city with a population of more than 100,000) was executed, but there was no clear plan to mature those churches.
3. **Lack of spiritual depth in the new converts:** Thousands were being baptized rapidly but many were also leaving. The teaching to become a Christian was thorough, but did not keep up with maturing them in Christ.
4. **Human pride:** Self-reliance had subtly replaced God-reliance. The Greatest Commandment had fallen into the long shadow of the pride of humanity and our arrogance to others.

While these and other subplots were brewing in the 90s, our story took a severe twist early in the new millennium. God disciplined us for losing focus on him as clearly stated in the Greatest Commandment. Our key leader was asked to step down. The unresolved conflict from years of dysfunctional conflict resolution in leadership resulted in a firestorm lit by an e-mail and fanned by anonymous fire-breathers on the Internet. Every frame of our story was reexamined anew in light of the scriptures and in the darkness of those who reveled in the pain.

Would this story wind up as a tragedy? People responded to God's discipline by writing various endings to their own stories. Some left God. Many left our churches. While the staff in our churches was reduced by 50 percent overnight, remarkably, most leaders repented openly, renewing their commitment to God and his mission. Most members demonstrated they were serious about completely loving God and each other. Humility became the standard, maturity the goal and God the center. God got our attention. As he promised, we are now beginning to see a harvest of righteousness and peace. Consider the following:

1. Our evangelists are seeking more biblical training and are feeding the flock with more spiritual meat while inspiring us to the mission.
2. Building impatiently with wood, hay and straw has been traded for building to last with gold, silver and precious stones.
3. Lacking in our early years, many seasoned leaders now mentor the young leaders.
4. God has grown our membership for the last three years. Our campus ministries are on fire again, bringing us our third generation of leaders. God blessed the 2009 International Campus Ministry Conference in twenty countries around the world with a total attendance of 4,500.
5. Quite remarkably, by God's grace over 130 churches were planted during the most difficult time in our story.
6. 90 percent of our membership have formally committed to working together in a unified way to live out the rest of our story with the Great Commandment and the Great Commission intertwined by committing to a Plan for United Cooperation (www.icocco-op.org).

GOD'S GREAT VISION

The director is the only person who has envisioned every scene of a movie before he films it. He relies on the crew and the cast to carry out the vision. God is our studio head, financier, executive producer and director for this story on earth. We are just grateful to be a part of the cast and crew—not so we can see our names flash through the credits, but for the sheer joy of honoring God's vision for the redemptive victories of millions of lives of real people. There is no better story than that of God coming to earth to seek us out for a real relationship: the destruction of our sin that pours from the blood of the cross and the victorious life that springs from the grave of baptism and resurrection of daily discipleship. That is "the greatest story ever told."

ROGER LAMB SERVED IN FULL-TIME MINISTRY FOR TWENTY YEARS. FOR THE LAST TWENTY YEARS HE DIRECTED THE OFFICIAL MEDIA FOR THE INTERNATIONAL CHURCHES OF CHRIST. HE CURRENTLY IS THE FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF THE NON-PROFIT MEDIA COMPANY DISCIPLES TODAY. HE AND HIS WIFE MARCIA AUTHORED *THIS DOESN'T FEEL LIKE LOVE: TRUSTING GOD WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN* (BOSTON: DISCIPLESHIP PUBLICATIONS INTERNATIONAL, 1996).



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