

# THE OTHER GREAT COMMISSION

James Cox

**A**s the earthly ministry of Jesus came to a close, he began preparing his disciples for the challenge of taking the gospel to the people of the world. A few days before his ascension, he gave them an assignment that I have chosen to call "the other great commission."

When we hear references to the gospel commission, we think almost instinctively of that remarkable statement of Jesus, usually called "The Great Commission," with which Matthew concludes his gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go, make disciples among all peoples, baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all my commands. You can count on my being with you day after day (lit. 'all days')—to the very last day of this eschatological age (Matthew 28:18-20).<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed a great commission. It is backed by God's ultimate authority. It is global in vision, noble in aspirations, and rich in promises. Notice also the apparently purposeful repetition of the adjective: "All authority, all people, all my commands, all days." This commission consists of:

**A great declaration:** "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

**Four great commands:** "Go, make disciples, baptize them, teach them."

**A great promise:** "You can count on my being with you day after day after day—to the very last day of this eschatological age."

On the other hand, when we hear references to the gospel commission, we rarely if ever think of the sayings of Jesus with which John wraps up the final major movement of his Gospel, "The other great commission:"

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you. . . Receive the Holy Spirit. . . Whosoever sins you forgive are forgiven, and whosoever sins you retain are retained" (John 20:21-23).

This passage also records a "great" commission of Jesus. It consists of:

**A great mission:** "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

**A great invitation:** "Receive the Holy Spirit."

**A great responsibility:** "Whosoever sins you forgive are forgiven, and whosoever sins you retain are retained."

Late on resurrection Sunday, John tells us, Jesus joined his faithful (though fearful) disciples and, after greeting them with a typical Palestinian greeting, *shalom alekem* (peace to you), he commissioned them with the words, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When praying his great highpriestly prayer, Jesus voiced very similar words: "As you [Father] have sent me into the

world, so I am sending them" (John 17:18).

John undoubtedly intended his readers to ask, "How did the Father send the Son?" And there can be little doubt that he wanted them to recall that he had already reported the answer to the question: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world. On the contrary, [he sent him] to save it," and, "I came not to condemn the world. Quite the contrary, I came to save it" (John 3:17; 12:47).<sup>2</sup> John wanted his readers to understand also that the role of Christ's followers was to save the world, not to condemn it. (Condemnation is God's prerogative.)

Jesus continued his commission by making even more explicit the heart of the saving service to which he was calling his disciples. Having invited them to receive the Holy Spirit, without which they would be powerless to fulfill their mission, he added, "Whosoever sins you forgive are forgiven, and whosoever sins you retain, are retained."

Because of all the debate, much of it irrelevant, that has gathered around this trenchant saying, we too easily miss its real point. In the first place, we must remind ourselves that it is in semitic parallelism, which means that the negative force of the second line reinforces the positive thrust of the first. It is as if Jesus had said, "Just as I have been, so you are to be the conduits through which God's forgiveness flows to the world. It is not your commission to condemn

the world. God will care for that. It is your responsibility to communicate his forgiveness. I want to be sure that you understand this. Therefore, I will hold you responsible if you fail."

The story of the woman taken in adultery is an outstanding illustration of this very point (see John 8:2-11). After the scribes and the Pharisees had sought to condemn the poor woman on a legalistic interpretation of the Torah, Jesus, applying the intentions of the gospel, extended to her the very opposite—God's forgiveness. He said, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more."

God reaches out through his Son, his Spirit, and his people, offering forgiveness to the world. Indeed, in the name of the Son and under the guidance and prompting of the Spirit, it is our mission to communicate God's forgiveness—not condemnation—to the world.

If indeed that is our mission, we need to pause and ask a few pertinent questions. How can we communicate God's forgiveness if we have not accepted it ourselves, both individually and corporately? How can we convey God's forgiveness if we have not granted it to our fellow Christians, whether as individuals or as a group?

Ellen White, in a letter addressed to G. I. Butler (at the time president of the General Conference), wrote these moving words: "I am fearful to sanction sin and I am fearful to let go of the sinner. . . If we err, let it be on the side of mercy rather on the side of condemnation."<sup>3</sup> Surely her remarks are in tune with Jesus's attitude in the fourth Gospel. And surely they are relevant here.

One of the reasons we have such difficulty communicating God's forgiveness is that we have such difficulty accepting it for our own

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## A PHYSICIST'S PSALM

"We are to find God in what we know, not in what we do not know; God wants us to realize his presence, not in unsolved problems but in those that are solved . . . He must be recognized at the centre of life."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

**The whole earth is full of the glory of God.**

It may be seen by all who have eyes and ears,  
Who are blessed with the gift of understanding.

It is good for those who think about and work  
with things to give thanks and praise.

It is appropriate to express worship in the midst of things.

**Praise God in the laboratory.**

Praise God with the telescope and the microscope,  
with prisms and meter bars.

Let the motor's hum and the chug of the pump sound praise.

Praise God with measurements to the tenth place;

Laud him with cloud chambers and cyclotrons,  
with oscilloscopes and microchips.

**Praise God with ideas.**

Praise him with conservation laws and symmetry principles,  
On chalkboards and paper, on computer tapes and video screens,  
In equations and graphs, with statistics and integrals.

In the midst of activity and in quiet moments, let his glory  
be expressed by the works of hands and minds.

**Praise God with things, seen and unseen; with the common  
and the barely imagined.**

Engines and pulleys, bubbles and photons,  
Together with the neutrino and the physicist,  
the quark and the quasar,

Things hidden and things revealed—all are his creation.

Emptiness and fullness, picoseconds and eons are his.

He is the hidden one, the Creator; let all our works  
meet his in praise.

**Praise God with expressions of wonder and awe.**

Praise him with a sense of the vastness of space  
and the emptiness of the nucleus,

In the presence of stability and change, symmetry and chaos.

The uncertainties are his and in him infinities are measurable.

Let wonder and awe and glory be expressed  
with paradox and harmony, in numbers and units.

**The whole universe is full of the glory of God.**

Let everything that is be an instrument of his praise.

Albert E. Smith

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What should be the level of sharing?

What will be the disciplines of the group (confidentiality, starting and ending on time, calling if you can't make it, etc.)?

Who will lead the group? Will leadership be shared?

\* **Write an agreement.** For the sake of clarity and evaluation at the end of the commitment, it can be useful for the group to write out what is agreed upon.

\* **The schedule of the meeting should include certain basics.**

Sharing the Word of God with emphasis on what it says, what it means, and how to apply it to each person's life.

Sharing each other's histories, present circumstances, and future dreams.

Sharing in prayer that is natural, not forced, where members can rejoice with the Scriptures, and pray for one another's needs and relationships.

\* **Accept people where they are.** You can't change people. Only they, with God's help, can choose to change. Your role is to teach, encourage, and accept them where they are.

\* **Nurture relationships between meetings.** Christianity in some Western cultures tends to be event-centered. Make sure that expressions of love and caring are not confined to the meeting only.

\* **Plan a balance between givers and takers.** Some people have such great emotional needs that they have little to contribute to others. A group with all takers and no givers will not work.

\* **Don't be afraid to dissolve a group at the end of the covenant.** If the group agreed to meet for a given time only, nobody needs to feel badly about the group's demise. Some may wish to reorganize for another time period, which is their prerogative.

\* **If you are the leader, beware of burnout.** We've found that with

most students' schedules, a team approach to leadership is essential in order to avoid putting too heavy a load on any one person.

\* **Beware of becoming ingrown.** Ultimately, if a group is to remain healthy, it must spill over to others outside its boundaries. It is easy to become what Becky Pippert describes as a "holy huddle."

\* **Read about small groups.** These principles have worked in North America, and most of them should work in other cultures as well. They may enable you to discover afresh what Christians have learned on campuses around the world and throughout history—that Jesus Christ is present to empower his people to live out his love among those who are thirsty for the water and wine that he died to give. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35, RSV).

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## The Other Great ...

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sins. Another reason is our incorrect notion that recognizing God's forgiveness of others implies our approval of sin.

Let us accept our Christian role as conduits through which God's forgiveness can freely flow to the world. And let us accept his forgiveness for those many occasions when we have failed, because of our legalism and intolerance, to convey his forgiveness to the world.

### NOTES

1 All quotations from the gospels are translated directly from the Greek text.

2 A literal translation of John 3:17 would read, "On the contrary, (he sent him) so that the world might be saved by him."

3 See Letter 16, April 21, 1887.

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## Useful Resources

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### Campus Ministry

The National Council of Churches published in 1986 a 205-page collection of papers and a study guide entitled *Invitation to Dialogue: The Theology of College Chaplaincy and Campus Ministry*. Copies can be obtained for US\$ 4.00 each by writing to: Education in the Society, NCC; 475 Riverside Drive, Room 710; New York, NY 10115; U.S.A.

### Response to Secularism

The General Conference Committee on Secularism has published through Andrews University Press a selection of the papers and its final report on the subject. The 206-page book, which also contains an annotated bibliography, is entitled *Meeting the Secular Mind: Some Adventist Perspectives* (edited by Humberto M. Rasi and Fritz Guy), 2nd edition, 1987. A limited number of copies can be obtained for US\$ 5.00 each by writing to: Education Department - Room 342; 6840 Eastern Ave. NW; Washington D.C. 20012; U.S.A.