WHAT DID JESUS SAY? GREAT COMISSION 3

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Category: Mission

If we are going to discuss the *Great Commission* we need to spend a few minutes considering what exactly the commission is. Now, this may sound obvious, most people would say that the commission consists of Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18,20:

> *Jesus came and told his disciples, â€œI 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.â€*

So far so good, most people wouldn't argue with this. However, when Luke records the same event, he has Jesus saying something slightly different (Acts 1:8):

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhereâ€"in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.â€*

So which of these did Jesus' say?

Well, one approach would be to suggest that Jesus actually gave two slightly differing commissions on two different occasions. However, the similarity between the content (we will come back to this later), setting (on top of a mountain) and the fact that for both Luke and Matthew these are the last words of Jesus' earthly ministry seem to indicate that this is the same event being recorded in two different ways.

The notion that Matthew and Luke wrote down Jesus' words in slightly differing fashions is nothing new to serious students of the Bible. However, there are some who find this notion very disturbing; they want to believe that the Bible contains the exact words of Jesus: isn't that why we have red letter editions?

The thing is, different writers of the Scriptures went about their work in different ways. Luke and Matthew were writing down Jesus words many years after Jesus actually spoke them and they were writing in Greek, which Jesus had spoken in Aramaic. Additionally, each of them was writing for a different audience; Matthew mainly for Jews, and Luke for Gentiles. What is more, they were writing personal accounts, not detailed *reportage*. They chose the events they wanted to include in their Gospels, including which of Jesus words to recall. None of the Gospel writers took down Jesus' words as diction and the best that we ever have are edited highlights of what he said. One indication of this is the way that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 is actually very short if you read it out loud - but we know that Jesus used to teach for long periods of time.

Just think about it, the two versions of the *Great Commission* that I have quoted above can both be

read out in a matter of a minute or so. It seems highly unlikely that Jesus would make his disciples walk all the way up the mountain just to say those few words. I'm sure that he talked to them for a long time, saying far more than Matthew and Luke wrote down. However, when they came to set out what they saw as essential for their audiences, they set out the familiar words that we have today.

So what did Jesus say on the mountain top? We don't actually know in detail - but we know what we need to know and that is the important issue.

In a later post in this series, I'll look at the things which are common to Luke and Matthew's accounts.