TENNENT CHAPTER 5: THE SENDING FATHER AND THE SENT CHURCH

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A review of the various commissions that Jesus gave to the church in the Gospels and Acts.
Category: Mission

Through the centuries and in different places, Christianity has looked very different. The identity of the church is in the person and work of Jesus and Jesus has given the church a mission.

Clarifications Concerning the â€œGreat Commission(s)â€

The term â€œGreat Commissionâ€ is relatively recent. Carey didnâ€™t use it in his Enquiry. The term is often used to apply simply to Matthew 28:18-20 and unfortunately is read in isolation from its context in the Gospel and the whole of Scripture.

For much of church history, it was believed to have been fulfilled through the apostles. It was often used in defence of the deity of Christ or the Trinity, but not for evangelism.

Today the phrase is widely used and can be helpful, but it also breeds confusion about the nature of mission.

The â€œGreat Commissionâ€ Refers to Multiple Texts

There are commissions in Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20 and Acts 1. Together they form the â€œGreat Commissionâ€ we should never use the term just to refer to Matthew.

Postressurection Sayings of Christ

The various commissions all occur after the resurrection and form a significant part of Christâ€™s teaching at that period.

Reading the Texts in the Context of the Gospels

Each of the commissions needs to be read in its own context. They are impoverished when they are read on their own.

THE GREAT COMMISSION TEXTS

Matthew: Fulfilling the Abrahamic Promise by Making Disciples of All Nations

It isnâ€™t always easy to square the commission to make disciples of all nations with the content of Matthewâ€™s Gospel.

Matthewâ€™s Gospel and the Mission To All Nations

We need to see how the text in Matthew 28:18-20 fits in the whole Gospel

Genealogy

Matthew traces Jesusâ€™ descent back to Abraham, but also includes a number of non-Jews.

Magi

Matthew says nothing about the birth of Jesus, but does have the story of the arrival of foreigners to greet him.

Fleeing to Egypt

Jesus and his family retrace Abrahamsâ€™ steps in fleeing to Egypt and then recreate the Exodus on their return.

Inauguration of Jesusâ€™ Ministry

In Matthew Jesusâ€™ ministry starts and ends in â€œGalilee of the Gentilesâ€ not in Jerusalem.

Godâ€™s Grace Beyond Israel in Matthewâ€™s Gospel

Matthew records Jesus teaching that Jews have no privilege over Gentiles by right. He also shows Jesus healing Gentiles.

The Sign of Jonah

Jonahâ€™s three days in the belly of the fish and mission to Nineveh are compared to Jesus burial and the subsequent mission to the Gentiles.

Hard Sayings of Jesus

In Matthew 10 Jesus sent out his disciples and told them not to go to the Gentiles and in Ch 15 he tells the Canaanite woman that he had come to Israel not the Gentiles.

From the context and other sayings, Ch 10 is demonstrating that the time had not yet come for the Gentile mission, but that it would come. The Ch15 text is similar and points to the imminent Gentile mission.

Matthewâ€™s Apocalypse

Chapters 24 and 25 are a long discourse focusing on the end times. The preaching to all nations (24:14) is a statement of optimism about the final outcome, a sign of the coming end. It is not the cause of the parousia.

Matthewâ€™s Great Commission

The commission to go to the nations flows naturally out of the Gospel. The command in 28:19-20 is built on an understanding of who Jesus is and what he has given. Jesusâ€™ being precedes the Churchâ€™s doing. There is a clear allusion to Daniel 7 where the Son of Man is given authority. The

only actual command in the passage is to â€˜make disciplesâ€™.

The command is a plural one; to make disciples of the nations, not of people within the nations.

Mark: In the Midst of Suffering, Preach the Gospel to All Nations

Themes in Markâ€™s Gospel

Mark is second in our NT, but it was the first to be written.

The theme of the nations is repeated in Mark as is the theme of suffering and persecution.

Markâ€™s Anonymous Great Commission

The oldest manuscripts of Mark close at 16:8. There is doubt over the authenticity of the conclusion beyond this. It certainly seems as though the ending was written by someone other than Mark.

The only imperative is â€˜to preachâ€™. Proclamation is a common theme in Mark.

The proclamation takes place in an eschatological context of salvation and condemnation and assumes that miraculous signs will accompany the preaching of the Gospel.

Though the language is not Markan, the themes are.

Luke-Acts: Holistic and Empowered Witness of Godâ€™s Mighty Deeds

Lukeâ€™s Gospel and Holistic, Empowered Witness

We need to see the two commissions given by Luke in the setting of his writings as well as in the context of the *missio Dei.* Both the Gospel and Acts are addressed to Theophilus.

Jesusâ€™ Presentation at the Temple

Luke is the only one to record this event, where Jesus is called â€˜a light for revelation to the Gentilesâ€™.

John the Baptistâ€™s Ministry of Preparation

All four Gospels mention John and quote Isaiah 40. However, Luke gives a longer quote, confirming Jesus ministry to the Gentiles.

Holistic Mission

Luke recordâ€™s Jesusâ€™ mission starting with the Nazareth manifesto (Luke 4:18-19, quoting Isa. 61:1-1). The concern for justice and the poor runs through Luke. Jesus is shown in solidarity with the disenfranchised and outcasts.

It would be a mistake to drive an unnatural wedge between proclamation and social ministry.

Second Commissioning in Luke

In addition to sending out the disciples to the Jews, Luke mentions sending out 70 (or 72) in Luke 10. The number seems to be symbolic and to reflect the Hebrew understanding of the number of nations. The sending out is in the name of the â€œLord of the Harvestâ€

Emphasis on the Holy Spirit

All mission is carried out in a Trinitarian framework and Lukeâ€™s emphasis on the Spirit reminds us of this. Various people are mentioned as being filled with the Spirit and the Spirit will help disciples to speak up in times of difficulty.

Universalistic Mission In Luke

Luke is well known for his interest in the Gentiles.

Lukeâ€™s Great Commission

The commission in the Gospel takes place in Jerusalem on the night after the resurrection; the one in Acts takes place in Bethany, just before the Ascension.

Lukeâ€™s Commissions in the Context of Godâ€™s Mission

Luke emphasises that the disciples cannot understand what is going on without Godâ€™s prior action. He also emphasises the witness of the church as a fulfilment of (and in continuity with) the OT.

Lukeâ€™s commissions have few actual commands, the are replaced by the language of fulfilment.

Scope of the Commissions in Luke-Acts

Luke shares a universal scope with Matthew. This universality is present in both Luke and Acts.

Witnesses of Godâ€™s Mighty Deeds

Luke pictures the church as witnesses.

John: the Sending Sent One

Johnâ€™s Gospel is written to persuade unbelievers to affirm the lordship of Christ â€“ a Missional framework.

John has many passages pointing to the universal nature of Christâ€™s coming.

The Sending Father in Johnâ€™s Gospel

Johnâ€™s Gospel is structured round the Father sending John, Jesus and the Spirit and culminates in his sending the Church.

Johnâ€™s Great Commission

The setting is the same as in Lukeâ€™s Gospel.

The mission of the church is a continuation of the ministry of Jesus.

It is clearly set within a Trinitarian framework.

It forms the basis for the ongoing sending ministry of the church today.

This post consists of my personal notes taken fromÂ Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century (Invitation to Theological Studies Series)Â by Timothy Tennent. Once you have read all my notes, please buy the book!