The Great Commission

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This ebook consists of a compilation of posts from my blog (kouya.net) and is available for distribution free of charge. My wife and I have worked with Wycliffe Bible Translators for over twenty-five years in a variety of translation and leadership roles. This hands-on experience of mission has, undoubtedly, influenced my understanding of the Jesus commission to the church.

I write as an introvert who is committed to the values of Christian community and as a very reluctant evangelist who believes that witnessing to Christ is one of our highest callings.

My aim is to eventually publish this booklet, as part of a compilation of my writings on Bible and Mission. Your thoughts and advice on this would be more than welcome.

Unless stated otherwise, Bible quotations are from the New Living Translation.

If you find this booklet helpful, it might be appropriate to make a donation to Wycliffe Bible Translators (wycliffe.org.uk).

Illustrations by Jason Ramasami - saamvisual.com
Introduction
When Jesus was about to leave the earth, he gathered his disciples together for one last time to speak to them. The world was about to change dramatically for the disciples: Jesus would no longer be with them and they would be the ones required to carry on his work. There, on a mountainside, Jesus outlined to them exactly how he wanted them to act in the future. Matthew captured Jesus words at the very end of his Gospel, in what has become known as "The Great Commission" (Matthew 28:18-20).

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, baptising 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."

Luke also recorded a version of these words at the opening of the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:8), but his version tends to be referred to less frequently than Matthew's.

These are the last words that the risen Jesus spoke to his assembled disciples and as Christians we have to take them very seriously. Over the years I have heard them referred to in many different ways, including "God's Marching Orders to the Church" and "The Church's Prime Directive". Clearly, Jesus saw this command to make disciples as being very important, which is why he delivered it in in such a dramatic situation. However, we need to remember that he did not consider the Great Commission to be the most important commandment, or even the second most important, come to that (Matthew 22:37-39). In many ways, the Great Commission is no more than an outworking of the greater commands to love God and our neighbours.

In many circles, the Great Commission has taken on a huge significance and importance. The last few verses of Matthew are among the most quoted parts of the Gospels and the phrase Great Commission has become talismanic, describing certain types of church or Christian. More than one mission agency in the US has their headquarters located on "Great Commission Road" or "Great Commission Way". However, I believe that it is one of those parts of the Bible where familiarity has bred, if not contempt, then complacency. Jesus’ words feel so familiar and their call on our lives seems so obvious, that we sometimes don’t stop to ask whether we have really understood what is being said.

This chapter takes a fresh look at Jesus words as recorded by Matthew and Luke and brings them to life for the Church in the early part of the 21st Century.

Commission Impossible
You don't have to look very far in Christian books or on the internet to find plans to 'accomplish the Great Commission'. There is a vast body of literature explaining how we can 'finish the task' or words to that effect. But, how realistic is this?
The command in Matthew 28 is to make disciples of all nations. It is not to preach to all nations; it is not to establish churches in all nations or to translate the Scriptures into every language that needs it. Making disciples is a continuous job. No one is ever fully a disciple, and even when the Gospel is well established in a country it doesn't mean that the nation is full of disciples. The Christian message has been part of the British national culture for over 1,500 years, but anyone who thinks that this nation has no further need of disciple-making just hasn't been here for a while.

There are some tasks which can be seen as projects: they have a start point and an end point. Other jobs are not like that; they may have a starting point, but they have to be carried on all the time because there is always something new about them. The Great Commission is like the latter: every generation is faced with a whole load of new people who need to become disciples of Jesus. Nations which once rejoiced in millions of disciples turn away from God and need to be reached all over again. The Great Commission is not a one-off task that can one day be checked off the church's to-do list; it is our on-going mission which is being continually renewed as we have the amazing privilege of making disciples anew across the whole of geography and history.

In essence, I believe that our response to the missional call in the Bible is bound up in our posture before God and before the world. It is not a task on our to-do list that can be finished so that we can move on to something else.

**The Manner of Mission**

As Christians, we can get very hung up on activities: on doing stuff. There are literally hundreds of plans for world evangelisation and strategies to reach all of the nations for Christ. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that doing stuff and making plans is wrong, but the way in which we do things can often be far more important than the actual thing we do. You can sweep a floor to the glory of God and you can preach a sermon to your own glorification: it all depends on your attitude.

This is why I believe that John 20:21 needs to be taken as the key text for mission at our point in history.

*As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. (NLT)*

This verse doesn't tell us what Jesus is sending us to do (make disciples, bear witness to him), but it does tell us how he is sending us. He is sending us in the same way that the Father sent him. Obviously, there is far more in this simple phrase than can be covered in a short chapter, but I'd like to highlight three (related) ways in which the Father sent Jesus and in which Jesus sends us.

**Humility:** The Son of God, who was intimately involved in every aspect of creation, came to earth as baby and was laid in a manger. He lived the life of a wandering teacher without wealth or status and was eventually executed as a common criminal. He befriended outcasts and the marginalised and was routinely shunned by people in authority and influence. Even in his teaching he did not push his own agenda, but spoke the words given to him by his Father.
And this is how Jesus sends us out into the world: as humble servants, not as rulers and conquerors. We are not sent to build empires or to extend the reach of our denominations or our personal projects – we are sent to serve and to proclaim the Good News of Jesus. It is a sad fact that the message of Jesus has been distorted around the globe because missionaries have tended to come from the rich and powerful Western nations. This means that the message of the humble, suffering servant has come tied up with the trappings of economic and political power. We need to find ways to decouple the Gospel of Jesus from the cultural baggage that so often comes attached to it and we need to learn to be servants as Jesus was.

**Sacrifice:** Jesus was sent to give himself for us. The whole of his life, culminating in his appalling death, was a demonstration of his love and sacrifice for us. He did not retain the comfort, the majesty, the position or ultimately the life which was rightly his: he gave them all up freely for us.

Mission is a call to sacrifice ourselves for Jesus. It involves giving up comfort, status, time, money – everything. Whether we are called as church-planting missionaries to Timbuktu or as school teachers in Tottenham, God calls us to lay our lives on the line for him. There are times of great joy as we follow God which make all the sacrifices worthwhile. But there are times when it is hard, tough and seems to lead nowhere – but our call is to stick with it and to continue to follow.

**Triumph:** Jesus came in triumph, but it was a strange upside-down sort of triumph. His cry on the cross, "it is finished," had an element of triumph and victory – the sense of a difficult job accomplished against all the odds.

There is a triumph in mission too, but it isn’t found in the spectacular pronouncements of the TV preachers or the building of ecclesiastic or mission empires. Mission triumph is found in Henry Martyn burning out for God in Central Asia bringing the Scriptures to Muslim peoples. Christian triumph is seen in the quiet life of Liang, a Chinese believer who helped plant a church among the Li people on the Chinese island of Hunan, despite the fact that the Li had martyred her husband just a few weeks earlier. Jesus sends us out in the same way that he was sent out and victory is only won at a price.

**What Did Jesus Say?**
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, since most people would say that the commission consists of Jesus' words in Matthew 28:18,20:

*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, baptising 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."*
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 everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

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 probably 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 he actually spoke them and they were writing in Greek, while 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 had a tape-recorder switched on while Jesus was speaking 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.

When we look at the two passages, we see that there are two themes which are common to both Matthew and Luke's accounts of Jesus' words.

- The geographical mandate. Matthew talks about "all nations" and Luke says to the "ends of the earth".
- Both mention telling people about Jesus: "teach them to obey all the commands I have given you" and "you will be my witnesses".
Perhaps the most important question to ask at this point is why both Matthew and Luke both picked up on these two issues and not on the others?

**The Geographical Mandate.** I think the reason that both of them mentioned the spread of the Gospel around the world is that it was so outrageous to the disciples at the time. Since the days of Abraham, the people of Israel had seen themselves as the centre of God's attention. They had forgotten, apparently, that they were supposed to be a blessing to every people. Not only that, but Jesus' ministry was more or less confined to the Jewish nation, with only a short excursion into Samaria and the occasional meeting with Gentiles.

Now, on top of this mountain, Jesus gives a mandate to take the Gospel to the whole world; this must have been gobsmacking for the disciples. They were expecting Jesus to restore the kingship to Israel (Acts 1:6), but instead he told them to take the message to the wider world.

Years later, as Matthew and Luke came to write down their accounts, they would have seen the way the Gospel had spread out of the boundaries of Israel and was on its way to being a mainly Gentile movement. In fact, we know from the book of Acts that Luke himself had played a key role in the process.

I would suggest that the difference in wording between Matthew's account and Luke's is not significant, though Luke clearly uses this as an introduction to point out how the Gospel will spread in the next few chapters of his work.

**Telling People about Jesus.** This is quite simply the centre of the Christian faith. Pointing people to Jesus and his reconciling work on the cross is at the heart of any form of Christian mission. However, this was also a radical departure for the disciples. They had been brought up as good Jews and if 'evangelism' had been part of their lives they would have told people about Moses, the covenant and the law. Jesus is effectively saying that he has replaced, or fulfilled, all that they had previously counted important and that his disciples should simply tell people about him and to obey his commands.

I reckon that sometimes we complicate mission. It isn’t about strategies and movements and all that stuff. It’s about telling people, wherever we are, about Jesus.

Let’s put these two themes together; we are to tell people about Jesus wherever we find ourselves. If this is the case, then Bible translation – making the record about Jesus available to people wherever they are in the world – must lie at the heart of what Jesus requires of his church.

I just thought that I’d mention it!

**What Luke Wrote**

Having looked at the issues which are common to both Matthew and Luke, let’s now turn to the things which Luke mentions in his account, but which Matthew omits.
The Holy Spirit

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere - in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

It is not surprising that Luke mentions Jesus talking about the Holy Spirit. These verses are part of the introduction to a book in which the main character is the Spirit at work through Christ’s disciples. Matthew on the other hand was writing the closing section to a book in which the Spirit was rarely mentioned; perhaps this explains why he omitted these words.

There are four aspects of the work of the Spirit in mission that I would like to highlight.

**Signs and Wonders.** It is clear from the book of Acts that the Spirit empowered the disciples to perform many signs and wonders. More or less the first manifestation of the Spirit was the miracle of languages at the feast of Pentecost in Acts 2. Numerous other people, not just the apostles, are mentioned as performing miracles. These include Philip at Samaria in the early part of Acts 8.

I don’t see any biblical case for inferring that miracles have ceased or that they were only a feature of the Apostolic age. Equally, I can't see a biblical case for insisting that miracles should always accompany the work of the Spirit either. The contrast between Philip's miraculous ministry at the start of Acts 8 to his patient, detailed explanation of Scripture in the second half of the same chapter gives us a picture of a Spirit who is gloriously flexible in the way he reaches out to the world. This leads us into the second theme.

**Discernment.** Guided by the Spirit, Philip used different evangelistic methods in different situations. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to mission; we need discernment from the Spirit to help us know where to go and what to do.

**Success.** It is the Spirit who brings success in mission, not us. God is sovereign and the mission is his, not ours. All of the powers of human technology, persuasiveness and charm cannot effect spiritual change in this world; only God can and he does so by his Spirit. This is not to say that technology, persuasiveness and charm are bad things. God is able to use our talents, our strengths and our weaknesses, but he, not us, is the one who can change the world.

**Sanctification.** Whatever natural gifts we bring to the missional table, it is clear that we need to be constantly made more like Christ in our attitudes and actions. Once again, this is a work of the Spirit. Very often, one of the profoundest impacts of any mission work is the way in which God uses it to change the missionary.

**Witness**

Another concept that we find in Luke but not in Matthew is the idea of being a witness to Jesus. It is interesting to note that Matthew concentrates on the relationship between the apostles and the people they would meet (make disciples, teach them to obey, baptise them), whereas Luke talks about the relationship between the apostles and Jesus (be my witnesses).

Being a witness is a fairly straightforward activity – you tell people what you have seen and experienced. It isn't rocket science, although as many of us know, it can be difficult in our secular
world to gather the courage to tell people about Jesus. That’s where the power of the Spirit is so important.

I think there are three important issues to highlight on this theme.

**We Are Jesus’ Witnesses.** It should go without saying, but our role is not to witness to or promote our church, our denomination, our favourite Christian music or whatever. These things may all be a support and help in witnessing to Jesus, but they should never be the centre of what we talk about. If you are constantly inviting people to come and hear your favourite preacher but never inviting them to meet Jesus, then something has gone wrong.

We also need to remember that we aren’t Paul’s witnesses. For many Western Christians, Paul’s logical approach is easier to follow and make sense of than Jesus’ parables and story telling. Be that as it may, our job is to tell people about Jesus. Paul can help us do that, but he should never be the focus.

Witnessing to Jesus is pointing people to a person so that they can come to know him for themselves. It isn’t about simple slogans – even if they are taken from the Bible. Holding up a placard saying “John 3:16” at a sporting event is not witness; it just blocks the view for the guy behind you.

**We Witness to the Biblical Jesus.** We need to be familiar with the Gospels and with Jesus as he is portrayed in them. Jesus doesn’t fit nicely into our theological categories, but that doesn’t mean that we are at liberty to squeeze him into moulds of our own devising. We have to witness to him as the Scriptures talk about him. This means taking into account his historical and religious background. He was a first century Jew and lived his life in the light of the Old Testament story of Israel. We can’t make him out to be an early 21st century lifestyle guru. The Jesus of the Bible is a figure who lives at the centre of God’s massive story of reconciliation and we have to reflect that.

**We Witness to the Present Jesus.** Matthew tells us that Jesus promised to be with his disciples until the end of the world and we need to be able to witness to his presence and action in our lives. This witness needs to be up to date. All too often people view a testimony as the story of how we were converted. However not everyone has a dramatic conversion story and for others the story of their conversion is so far in the past that it is only of interest to historians! I became a believer in 1974. That is half a life-time ago and the long-haired teenager who ‘accepted Christ’ that evening hasn’t existed for a long while. I’ve grown and become a different person. If the only thing I can say about Christ working in my life goes back to my childhood, not only is my testimony boring, but my spiritual life must be in a right mess too!

So, when will we finish witnessing to Jesus? When will we accomplish the Commission? Never! Even if the whole world were Christian, we would have the glorious obligation of telling people about Jesus and what he has done. Bearing witness to the amazing things that Christ has accomplished is an on-going joy. I reckon it will still be a full-time job in eternity!
What Matthew Wrote

Worship
Having looked at some of the things that Luke said which Matthew omitted, let's turn to Matthew's Gospel and examine the things that he mentions which are omitted by Luke. Let's start with his introduction to the Great Commission.

*Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. (Matthew 28:17)*

In passing, I love the mention that 'some doubted'. Even after all they had seen, some of the disciples found it hard to believe in Jesus' resurrection. It is easy to understand why they doubted, the whole thing was so mind-blowing and unlikely that doubt is a perfectly natural response and the Bible is brutally honest about the disciples. A modern author might have ignored that little point, or edited the Wikipedia page to remove the embarrassing doubts, but not the Bible!

However, the proper response to Jesus is not doubt; it is worship. If we are not moved to worship him, then it is unlikely that we will get off our metaphorical rear ends to witness to him to the ends of the earth either. Worship is the start of mission; it involves appreciating, enjoying and reflecting back to Christ his greatness, grace and majesty. If we can't be moved to tell Jesus how wonderful he is, we are unlikely to be moved to tell the same thing to our neighbours!

Just one more comment in passing. When it says that they worshipped, I don't for one moment believe that Nathaniel picked up a guitar and, with his head tilted slightly to one side and his eyes closed, started to lead the disciples in a worship song. Somewhere along the line, the word worship has become synonymous with singing (and limited to a certain type of song). We need to reclaim the word 'worship'!

... worship as the Bible characterises it cannot be limited to singing praise and worship songs to God. Although it includes this, it is far more all-encompassing than that. Worship is nothing less than offering our whole lives back to God though Jesus. It is taking all the elements that make up human life, (family, friendships, money, work, nation etc.) and presenting them back to the One who gives them their ultimate meaning in the first place. (ReJesus: A Wild Messiah for a Missional Church by Mike Frost and Alan Hirsch p.125.)
Authority
Another theme which Matthew highlights, but Luke does not mention, is the one of authority.

We can be very diffident about spreading the Christian message in this day and age. What right have we to tell people that they need to come to Christ? Or what gives us the right to take the Christian message to other parts of the world?

The simple answer to questions like this is that we have the right to spread the Christian message, because Jesus has ultimate authority and he gives us not just the right, but the obligation to take the Gospel out into the wider world. This short passage from Matthew makes it clear that Christian mission is carried out by Christ's authority, at Christ's command and in Christ's presence (anyone looking for a three point sermon is welcome to use this)!

However, the outside world doesn’t recognise Christ's authority and we can't reasonably expect doors to open to the Gospel around the world because of this passage. It just doesn’t work like that. But whether or not the political authorities or social convention allows for the spread of the Christian message, we are still under an obligation from Jesus to make disciples in all nations. That includes post-modern Britain and it includes parts of the world that are quite happy with their own religious tradition, thank you very much.

Jesus' authority does not give us the excuse to be arrogant, unreasonable or manipulative. There is undoubtedly a time when Christians should directly confront the culture around them, but for the most part, Christian mission should be a model of gentleness and service. This is partly because gentleness is more effective than confrontation ("more flies are caught by honey than vinegar" is a quote I remember from the first book on evangelism that I ever read) but mainly because we are following in the steps of the one who became a servant and submitted to death on a cross.

What Matthew Didn't Say
Everyone knows that the Great Commission says 'Go into all the world' or words to that effect.

Actually, it doesn’t.

When we read the Gospels, we have to remember that we are reading an account, written in Greek, of a discourse given in Aramaic, with the whole lot translated into modern languages. While the central thrust and message is retained through all of this, some of the finer nuances and structures are inevitably lost. That is an inevitable part of the translation process – sorry and all that.

Some languages have grammatical structures which simply don’t exist in other languages and we come across one of those in the last couple of verses in Matthew 28.
Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

In English, the command to "go and" is quite common. We say things like "Go and buy a pint of milk", or "Go and see if your dad has fixed the car yet". In our English versions of the Bible, Jesus' command to the disciples is presented in this form "Go and make disciples...". So, from a thousand pulpits preachers thunder the missionary call to GO!

But the problem is that the original doesn't say that. In Greek, there are four commands; go, make disciples, baptise and teach and the central one of those is make disciples. First and foremost, Jesus commands us to make disciples, which can be done wherever we find ourselves.

Chris Wright explains this in his wonderful book, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative, where he says that 'go'

... is not an imperative at all in the text but a particle of attendant circumstances, an assumption – something taken for granted. Jesus did not primarily command his disciples to go; he commanded them to make disciples. (p.34)

There will be those who 'go' as in travel long distances to make disciples, but others are commanded to make disciples where they are. This is clearer from Luke's account of the same discourse in Acts 1 where he talks about witnessing to Jesus in Jerusalem (that's right here) and the ends of the earth.

In a sense, this sounds like an exercise in semantics, but I believe that there is an important point that we need to face up to here. Too much missionary theology and practice has been built around the command to GO. We have put those who cross cultures and who cross the sea onto a pedestal and made them into a special class of people: Missionaries. The problem is, all Christians are called to be missionaries, not just a special class.

Because we have identified a special group of people as missionaries, we often downplay or even ignore the missional calling of the rest of the church. People like me can put exciting pictures of exotic places on our blogs and Facebook pages because we are real missionaries. But the truth is that it can be far easier to be a witness to Christ in an African village than in urban Britain – I know, I've done both. Christians are far more likely to face hostility and abuse in the UK than they are in many parts of the so-called mission field.

For some people, the only going they ever do is the daily commute – but they are missionaries, called to witness to Christ and to make disciples in their workplace, and that can be blooming difficult. The London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (licc.org.uk) has many excellent resources for people who want to take their call to mission in the workplace seriously.

The other side of the 'Go' issue is the whole question of the missionary call. I don't want to get into this one in any depth, but I'd just like to point out that all of God's people have a call to mission. There is no special call that people like Sue and I receive that the rest don't get. The whole concept
of a special call is built on a few verses of Scripture taken out of context and gets far more prominence in the life of the church and mission agencies than it deserves! The truth is that every Christian has a call to mission; the only outstanding question is about location: local, national or international.

No Place for Hit and Run

Jesus’ command to the disciples is a pretty inclusive one: they are to make disciples, to baptise believers and to teach them to obey everything that Jesus taught. There are two implications that immediately jump to mind on reading this list.

1. They take a long time! Mission involves the church in a long term commitment to a group of people. Our missional responsibility to a group does not end when the Gospel has been preached, the Scriptures translated or a few people converted.
2. The need to make disciples, baptise and teach is renewed in every generation. Christian discipleship is not genetic and it is not simply cultural; it has to be renewed in each generation as people face up to the claims of Christ on their lives and come to follow him for themselves. It is not unusual for groups which were once strongly Christian to turn their backs on the Gospel over a period of a few generations – we may well be living through such a scenario in Western Europe today.

In mission circles it is common to talk about unreached or unengaged people groups (UPGs). These are groups who don’t have an active Christian witness in their midst. There is some value in this sort of categorisation as it can help us to focus resources where they are most needed (for example, translating the Scriptures for a group with no Bible at all, rather than working on the umpteenth translation into English). However, many writers ascribe a significance to the concept of unreached people which is not always helpful. (In passing, the way in which some mission scholars talk about people groups does not seem to take into account the increasing urbanisation of the world in which traditional boundaries and identities become very blurred.)

One of the problems with the whole UPG concept is that some people suggest that all we need to do is to "reach" the people with the Gospel and then move on. Clearly, this doesn't match up with Jesus' command in Matthew 28 which envisages a much longer term engagement from the church, renewed in each generation. Another problem is that, as we have seen, reached people groups can become unreached. Just a quick glance at any list of UPGs will reveal that large numbers of them are from parts of the world that were once Christian.
Once again, this is a reminder that the Great Commission is not a task we are called to complete, but a way of life we are called to adopt.

It’s Not About Checklists
One temptation when looking at Jesus' words recorded in Matthew is to see the different nations of the earth as being on a checklist. We've made disciples here: check. No disciples here yet: no check...

This sort of thinking reminds me of those surveys you see on Facebook from time to time: "the hundred foods everyone must eat", "twenty places to visit before you die", "how many of these books have you read?" and so on. They don’t ask if you know how to cook the food, whether you have made friends in the places you have visited or how much you understand about the background and context of the books you have read. It is all rather superficial.

Making disciples, baptising and teaching people to obey Jesus implicates the church in a long term engagement which is renewed in every generation. The idea of a checklist that says that a group is fulfilled is completely foreign to Jesus’ command.

This is reinforced by Luke's record which calls us to be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. In other words, wherever we are: in our home city, or area, a neighbouring country or in a far-away country, we have to be witnesses to Jesus. Far from giving a checklist of places that we must go to, Jesus was saying that wherever you are, you should be a witness or make disciples. Yes, some people are specially called to "go" to places, but all Christians, wherever they are, whatever they are doing, have a responsibility to be involved in mission.

Is the Age of the Great Commission Over?
What’s my favourite Bible passage? As I'm a missionary, you might expect me to reply that my favourite passage is the end of Matthew 28, but you’d be wrong.
Thirty years ago as a new Christian full of enthusiasm for what God had done in my life, I loved Psalm 40. A few years later when, together with my wife and young children, I was living in an isolated African village, Joshua 1:9 ("do not be terrified... for the LORD your God will be with you") became incredibly precious. These days as a trainer and equpper, I find Paul's charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2 is what gets me out of bed in the mornings. Over the years, God has spoken to me in different ways as my situation changed.

He has also spoken to the church in different ways down through the years.

In the early church, the drive for mission and expansion came from Paul's words in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female." If God had broken down religious, ethnic and cultural barriers then his people had to do the same thing and reach out into the world.

In the age of discovery as European nations opened up trade routes to other parts of the world, the watchword was Luke 14:23: "Compel them to come in". History tells us that sometimes the compelling was far too compulsory!

For the last two hundred years or so, the Great Commission of Matthew 28 has been the driving force for the missionary movement (especially in the Protestant world), "GO! and make disciples..." echoes from pulpits and missionary books around the world and the term Great Commission has come to be used as a sign of authentic Christian life. "I'm a Great Commission Christian". But, what if our situation moved on and God is saying something else to us at this point in our history?

When the modern missionary movement started, Matthew 28 was a radical, counter-cultural call to arms. For the most part, the church was self-absorbed and indifferent to the fate of people worldwide ("When God chooses to save the heathen, he will do so without your aid or mine"). The call to go and make disciples wasn't popular; it meant changing the way things were done. And, of course, people had to go: Europe was thought to be a Christian continent and the 'heathen' all lived far away!

The missionary movement was amazingly successful. There are now believers all over the world and many of the former mission fields have far more Christians than the old sending countries. Don't get me wrong, there is still plenty of mission work to do (including in many former 'Christian' countries), but things today are not what they were 200 years ago.

However, the simple idea of 'going' has now become very complex. At one time, a cross-cultural missionary got on a boat and disappeared to the other side of the world for years at a time. These days, we can reach the rest of the world without even going as far as Heathrow. Sponsorship and partnership schemes allow Western churches to make a huge impact for the Kingdom around the world. We can reach hidden groups, where traditional missionaries could never work simply by opening Overseas Students' cafés in British cities. What does going mean today?

The Great Commission is composed of active verbs: 'go, baptize, teach'. This is very appealing to Westerners at the start of the 21st Century. We like doing things and we are very good at planning and organising activities. Would you believe that there are about 50 new plans for world evangelism

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1 When William Carey first suggested starting missionary work in India, an older pastor, John Ryland Senior, is said to have replied; "Young man, sit down; when God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without your aid and mine."
produced every year? The Great Commission has become comfortable; it is no longer counter-cultural. We can plan and organise mission strategies, we can do stuff – that’s what we are good at. Yet, at the same time, world Christians comment that Western Christians seem dry and struggle with the intense times of prayer and teaching that are part of the life of the world church. I recall with some embarrassment the end of a three day retreat in Africa where one local leader stood up and said that at last, he was sure that missionaries were Christians! He’d always understood that missionaries knew a lot about the Bible and could help organise and run churches, but he hadn’t been at all convinced about the depth of their personal spiritual walk.

At this point in history we don’t need a call to mission that tells us to do things. We still need a call to mission, but we need one which upsets our presuppositions and gives a call to radical discipleship – the way the Great Commission did 200 years ago, or the call to unity in Galatians did for the early church.

As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you. John 20:21

As I suggested earlier, I believe that these words (especially when combined with the following verse, where Jesus breathes on his disciples and tells them to receive the Holy Spirit) are the counter-cultural call to mission which we need today.

This passage puts God right back at the centre of mission. The Father sends Jesus and Jesus sends the church (empowered by the Spirit). As a missionary, I’ve been sent out by a church to work for a mission organisation. However, this verse reminds us that all Christians are sent out by Jesus – just as he was sent by the Father. This doesn’t mean that the church and mission aren’t important, but it does put them in their proper place, and puts God right in the centre of things. This passage also helps to get rid of the concept of the professional missionary. Though it is common enough to say that we are all missionaries, there is still the lingering feeling that those who have gone are in a special class. John 20 takes the focus off ‘people going’ and places it on ‘Jesus sending’ – and he sends every one of us.

Jesus was sent out in the power of the Spirit – and he sends us out in the same way. Mission which is not Spirit-breathed will struggle for effectiveness. The best training and organisation count for little if God’s people don’t show evidence of the work of the Spirit in their lives and ministries.

God sent Jesus in humility, to serve and finally to sacrifice himself. Likewise, we should expect humility, service and sacrifice to be part of our lives as he sends us out. This sits very uneasily with some of the quasi-military rhetoric about marching and capturing and so on, which is part of the current church scene. Our call is to be humble servants, not conquering heroes (and churches need to be prepared to support humble servants and not expect every prayer letter to be full of success stories).
Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of Spirit-filled, self-sacrificing, Great Commission missionaries. It is the stories of people like Jim Elliot that first kindled my interest. But our modern Western Christians do not need a call to do things – we need a call to be like Jesus.

Down through the centuries the Christian faith has had its fair share of heroes and heroines, but for the most part, the Kingdom has spread as everyday Christians – not famous saints or great missionaries – have shared the Good News with their friends and families. It is for this that we are sent!

Francis of Assisi is attested to have said "preach the Gospel: use words if necessary" (though he would have said it in Latin, if indeed he did say it). Whether Francis said it or not, there is some wisdom in the saying. Some people are far too quick to push their faith on others, without a corresponding ethical, Kingdom lifestyle. Our words are given truth and power by our actions. However, actions are never enough. As we meet and get to know people there will need to be a time when we explain the message of the Gospel to them. We can't avoid words entirely and we must be prepared to explain what it is that Christ has done in our lives. Our words should be gentle, appropriate and persuasive; there is no place for "ramming our religion down other peoples' throats". But Jesus has sent us into the world to bear witness to him and we have to tell this world the story of his incarnation, life, death and resurrection.