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**The Great Commission
and the Milwaukee Police**

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The *Associated Press* had a good bit to say about the recent death of an 8-year old autistic boy at a Milwaukee, Wisconsin "faith healing center." Under the caption, "*Church 'healing' ruled Homicide,*" one report indicated that "according to the medical examiner's office, the boy was asphyxiated during a church service in which participants wrapped him in sheets while praying to expel 'evil demons' they believed caused his disorder."

Various reports chronicle how the 8-year-old's death was ruled a homicide and the presiding pastor was arrested, although the Milwaukee County District Attorney's office was not immediately clear on exactly what charges to bring--if any.

As the story developed, various community leaders, including a theology professor from the University of Chicago and numerous local clergy, were critical of the "healing and demon expelling" services. Yet the pastor stood firm.

Both in newspaper and television interviews he proclaimed his conviction that "*it is better to obey God than man.*" He explained, "What we were doing was pure Scripture. The idea of lying across the boy came from the Bible in the First Book of Kings, chapter 17 and verse 21. I am a man of God and I know I was obeying my

Lord Jesus when He commanded me, *'they shall cast out devils; they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.'*"

But did this "divine healer" and "demon caster" really have a case?

One thing is clear: the so-called "great commission" does indeed teach both casting out devils and divine healing. Mark 16:15-18 distinctly reads:

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.

"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.

"And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues;

"They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."

Popular spiritual leaders, who have themselves long distorted the whole commission to make it fit their programs, generally interpret this passage to refer to those who might be healed through far less than miraculous means. But the passage teaches no such thing. The promise is clearly stated: *"They shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover."* And this is just as clearly stated to be done as a *"sign"* of God working with them (Mark 16:19, 20).

The neglected fact is that the commission given by our Lord during his post-resurrection ministry does *not* contain God's program for today. If it did, believers everywhere--even carnal believers like the Corinthians--would have miraculous powers in confirmation of their message and the result would be that the attitude of observers would perforce be different.

While some evangelicals may look down on these "faith healers" as fanatics, it should not be difficult for them to understand that those who claim to be working under the "great commission" should be expected to *carry out* the "great commission" -all of it!

What we cannot understand is why they should be so horrified at the suggestion that the "great commission" is not the program for the Body of Christ when none of them would ever permit the consistent practice of that very commission in their own churches

How many, for example, evangelical churches, or even "word of faith" churches, for that matter, would be consistent enough to "take up serpents" as "signs," just as this very commission instructs?

Further, if someone in their congregation genuinely searched our Lord's earthly ministry to identify the "all things" to be observed in Matthew 28:20, how would they react? Would they encourage obedience to our Lord's instructions to His disciples to obey the law and ceremonies given by Moses (Matt. 23:1-3, Mark 1:44)?

If one should try to speak in tongues in their pulpits or conduct "healing" campaigns or teach baptismal salvation, would they allow it? And if anyone should try handling snakes in their midst?--*Well-!!*

Yet all of this, and more, is clearly a part of our Lord's post-resurrection commission to His disciples.

The answer to the confusion caused by picking and choosing which parts of the so-called great commission one attempts to follow lies in II Tim. 2:15.

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."

Only as we recognize the *dispensational setting* of our Lord's earthly ministry and the period covered by the early chapters of the Book Acts can we truly hope to understand what God would have us to be doing today.

WHAT THE COMMISSION COMMISSIONS

First, the so-called "great commission" does not contain the message which we are to proclaim today. It, for example, says *not one word* about the all-sufficiency of the finished work of Christ for salvation; it says *not one word* about Jews and Gentiles being baptized into one body, the Body of Christ; it says *not one word* about "the gospel of the grace of God" and the wonderful walk of grace it produces.

Further, those who claim to labor under this commission do not themselves obey it. They do not, for example, "*observe all things*" our Lord commanded during His earthly ministry--they do not sell their possessions and distribute the proceeds to the poor (Luke 12:33; Matt. 19:21); they do not send their missionaries out without provisions (Matt. 10:8-10); they do not attend synagogues on the Sabbath day or offer the sacrifices of the ceremonial law (Mark 1:44, Matt. 5:19). Few require water baptism for salvation (Mark 16:15, 16) or hold that the miraculous signs are the evidence of salvation (Mark. 16:17-20). And surely, outside of the Church of Rome, few claim to remit sins (John 20:23).

The Twelve Apostles and the "little flock" of Messiah's followers *did* begin to carry out their great commission. They *did* sell their belongings and distribute to the needy (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:34-35). They *did* go forth without material provision, so that their leader, Peter, could say, "*Silver and gold have I none*"(Acts 3:6). They practically lived in the temple and strictly observed the ceremonial law (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:42; 21:20). They required repentance and water baptism for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16), and miraculous signs *did* follow those who believed (Acts 2:4; 3:6-11; 5:12-16, Heb. 2:3, 4). Read carefully the early chapters of Acts--really read them—and observe how fully and meticulously they obeyed their great commission.

But early Acts also shows that the nation Israel would not heed their message or accept Jesus as Messiah, and thus the apostles were unable to fulfill their commission or make disciples of all nations. Even a superficial examination of the Abrahamic Covenant and the prophetic Scripture will confirm that the Gentiles were to be saved through *redeemed* Israel. This is why Israel and Jerusalem are mentioned "*first*" in the "great commission" (Luke 24:47, Acts 1:8). With Israel's refusal to accept her Messiah, her great commission was brought to a stand still. It could not at that time be fulfilled.

This is not to imply, however, that it has been annulled or permanently abandoned. Matthew 24:14 tells us concerning a future day:

"And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come."

But while our Lord's post-resurrection commission to his disciples has neither been fulfilled nor annulled, the Scriptures make it abundantly clear that for the present dispensation of grace it has been *superseded*. Our ascended, glorified Lord has issued *other* orders, those He committed by revelation to that *other* Apostle, Paul. Hence in Gal. 1:11, 12 Paul affirms:

"But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

"For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ."

He continues in the next chapter of Galatians to explain:

"And I went up [to Jerusalem] by revelation and communicated unto them [i.e., the apostles and elders at Jerusalem] THAT GOSPEL WHICH I PREACH AMONG THE GENTILES. . ." (2:2).

Clearly this was a message the Jerusalem leaders did not yet know. It was not the message that had been committed to them by the Lord when He was still on earth. Indeed, Paul goes on to explain how they did "see" and "perceive" the grace that was given to him and actually confirmed this by giving Paul and Barnabas "*the right hands of fellowship*" (2:7,9). Thus in a solemn, public, official acknowledgment the Jerusalem apostles and elders recognized Paul as God's Apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13), while they (who had first been sent to all the world) were now to confine their ministry to the "little flock" alone.

Could there be more positive evidence, more conclusive proof that the so-called "great commission" went *out of commission* and that it has been *superseded* by another even greater commission given to the Apostle Paul?

THE COMMISSION FOR TODAY

Paul, of course, preached Christ--but not as previously had been done. To the Twelve had been committed the preaching of Jesus Christ according to *covenant* and *prophecy*. Paul was later sent with "*the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery*" which had been "*kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest*" (Rom. 16:25). He called this message "*my gospel*" to

distinguish it from that which the Twelve had previously been preaching (see Rom.2:15; 16:25).

Both Peter and Paul preached Christ, for "*other foundation can no man lay*", but what a glorious advance Paul's message was. Thus the so-called "great commission" was replaced by an even greater one, entrusted to Paul and to us. II Corinthians 5:14-21 declares:

"For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead:

"And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again.

"Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea, though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more.

"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

"And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation;

"To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

With such a glorious message committed to our trust, how could we ever wish to return to Pentecost to carry out the commission given there! Here, unlike with the so-called great commission, we do have the all-sufficient, finished work of Christ for salvation. Here Paul does not proclaim the kingdom rights of Christ to a covenant people, as Peter did at Pentecost. Rather, he declares that God has "*committed to us the word of reconciliation*," offering to God's enemies everywhere reconciliation and peace through the death of Christ. Here, unlike the Twelve before him, our

apostle preaches the crucifixion as the most wonderful news, declaring that "*all things are of God*" and that He made Christ, the sinless One, to be sin for us, "*that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.*" What a message!!

And this is but the beginning, for as we search through the epistles of Paul we are overwhelmed by the exceeding riches of God's grace--riches He has entrusted to us to dispense to others, as faithful and instructed "*ambassadors for Christ*" For example, we who are reconciled by grace are baptized by the Spirit into the Body of Christ, inseparably and eternally united to Christ and to all other believers. We are given an identity in Christ Jesus at God the Father's right hand, blessed with all spiritual blessings and assured that before the prophesied day of wrath they will be caught up in glorified bodies to be forever with the One Who loved us and died for us. *What a prospect!*

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

With such a grand calling and glorious message comes a grave responsibility. See how Paul exhorts Timothy--and us:

"O Timothy, KEEP THAT WHICH IS COMMITTED TO THY TRUST, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called" (I Tim. 6:20).

"Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.

"That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us" (II Tim. 1:13, 14).

"And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also" (II Tim. 2:2).

Our Lord's great revelation committed to Paul is our great commission still. If we fail to recognize it or if we water it down to accommodate the confusion of our time, we will fail to obey it.

The multitudes about us--and the church herself--need us. Indeed, a little 8-year-old autistic boy needed us, for if a pastor had learned to rightly divide God's Word he might still be alive.

They need us to stand clearly, firmly, openly, courageously as "*ambassadors for Christ*," using our lives to make known to others the blessed message He has commissioned us to proclaim. We need the reminder that we have no right to choose our own calling. God says, "*Ye are not your own: ye are bought with a price.*"

Will you heed the call? May we not be satisfied to be used in some secondary way, but rather to the fullest possible extent let us give ourselves to making "*all men see*" the "exceeding riches of His grace" to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS

Long before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, the prophet Isaiah prophesied about His coming, listing five descriptive titles for the coming Messiah:

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon His shoulder: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, the everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6).

While these titles have special meaning for Israel, they also speak volumes for us today:

Wonderful. In every way He was and still is wonderful. Perhaps He is most wonderful in that He knows all about us-every sordid detail-and yet loves us still! Indeed, Paul declares, "He loved me, and *gave Himself for me*" (Gal. 2:20.)

Counselor. Psychological methods come and go but Jesus Christ is still the true Counselor. It is He who teaches us how to live, how to walk righteously, how to face tomorrow. Through the message He committed to Paul we "*have heard Him and have been taught by Him*" (Eph.4:21).

The Mighty God. Yes, Jesus Christ is God- "*The mighty God!*" There are those who deny this scriptural truth, claiming that Jesus Christ is a mighty God but not the *almighty* God. This assertion, however, is contrary to the clear teaching of Scripture: Look, for example, at Isaiah 45:23 and see that every knee will bow to Jehovah; then turn to Philippians 2:9-11 where we are told that every knee will bow to Jesus Christ.

And remember: "*My glory will I not give to another*" (Isa. 42:8). Jesus Christ is none other than Jehovah God in human flesh.

The Everlasting Father. This shows that Christ created all things; He is the originator of all. "In the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God...all things were made by Him; and without Him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3). "For by Him were all things created, that are in heaven and that are in earth..." (Col. 1:16).

The Prince of Peace. If only our political leaders would get this! When Jesus Christ returns to this earth "the government shall be upon His shoulder." He will rule with complete justice and peace, *true* "peace on earth," will be the result.

He also gives a peace of which the world knows nothing—"peace with God". In amazing grace God offers abundant peace to the guilty through Christ—"even the forgiveness of sins according to the riches of His grace," and says to every guilt-ridden soul, "*Now the God of all hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing.*"

This is the Christ of the Bible. Is He *your* Christ? If not, trust Him as your Savior today and you will receive the greatest gift of all-- "*the gift of eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.*"
