

Four Practices of a Great Commission Church

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The Great Commission does not call for churches to act like the Department of Motor Vehicles or information booths. I have one more for you: the Great Commission does not call for churches to act like professional sports teams.

My church staff likes to make fun of me for not knowing much about sports, which might be fair. But I do know the goal of every sports team is to win the championship. A team will try to hire the best players, build the best training facilities, and optimize its coaching staff to win its league's top trophy. Sure, a team is glad other teams exist—without them, there would be no league—but its main goal is to beat those other teams.

Now, I doubt many churches explicitly think to themselves, “We have to beat those other churches!” But let me ask a couple of diagnostic questions to test for an our-team-is-best mentality:

- Do you happily give away your best players to other churches?
- Do you rejoice if, after praying for revival, revival comes to the church down the street? (Thanks to Andy Johnson for this great question!)
- Do you pray regularly for the church down the street and other churches in your city?
- Do you give any portion of your budget to revitalizing old or raising new churches in your city, nationwide, or abroad?

Too often, a grotesque competitiveness between churches marks evangelical churches. But a Great Commission church does not compete with other gospel-preaching churches because it knows every gospel-preaching church is playing for the same team.

GREAT COMMISSION CHURCH = CHURCH PLANTING CHURCH

Here's the broader point: a Great Commission church is an evangelizing and discipling church but also a church-planting and church-revitalizing church. It wants to see the kingdom of God grow through its own ministry and expand beyond its own walls through other churches.

So, a Great Commission church is interested in facilitating lots of evangelistic activity going from itself in order to draw outsiders back to itself. However, it is also interested in seeing its efforts culminate in planting or supporting other local churches. It is not satisfied with its own health, it wants to see lots of other healthy, Bible-believing, gospel-preaching congregations.

Such a church encourages other evangelical churches and plants, even if they are several blocks away. And it prays for them by name. It is willing to send out good folks who will help

those other churches. It also works to plant or build up other churches on the other side of the world. A Great Commission church works and prays to raise men qualified to be elders and then selflessly sends them out.

It works to align its budget with these Great Commission priorities. Some money is kept for the ministry in its location, but some money is assigned to helping other works, both near and far. It works to reclaim dying congregations wherever it can.

It works in all sorts of public and private ways to cultivate this team mentality with other gospel-centered churches among its members. The members and leaders are as happy about a new gospel-preaching church as they are about a new restaurant opening in a land of starvation.

So, what does a Great Commission church do? I want to offer four strategic steps.

1. CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF DISCIPLING

First, a Great Commission church will cultivate a culture of discipling among its members. It helps every member own the responsibility for helping other believers grow in the faith. Pastors equip the saints for the work of ministry, says Paul (Eph. 4:11-12), which means the work of the ministry belongs to all the saints. The whole body, speaking the truth in love, grows as it builds itself up, each part doing its work (Eph. 4:15-16; see also 1 Cor. 12,14).

Discipleship is my following Jesus. Discipling is me helping someone else follow Jesus (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:2). In a Great Commission church, older men in the faith disciple younger men, and younger women seek out the older women. For instance, if you are a single woman, you might offer a stay-at-home mother in your church help with the laundry in exchange for the opportunity to ask lots of questions! You will surely recruit a junior teacher if you are a lay elder teaching an adult Sunday School class. And your goal, in a sense, is to train and hand over the teaching job to him. Then you can go and start another class and bring on another junior teacher.

A Great Commission church possesses the geographic sensitivity implied by Jesus' command to "Go." For those who stay, therefore, "going" may well mean moving closer to the church or groups of its members. That way, it is easy to minister to others throughout the week. Where do you live? Are you helping to cultivate a culture of discipling in your church where you choose to rent an apartment or purchase a home?

A Great Commission church should be uncomfortable, even provocative, for a nominal Christian. You may not like it if you show up as a guest in such a church on Sunday only as part of your casual religious duty. You would be welcomed, but its members would differ from what you are about. They are about giving their whole lives to follow Jesus and commit to helping one another follow Jesus. Such a commitment and activity are part of the culture: intentional questions, meaningful conversations, prayer, and continual reminders of the gospel.

Please look at Robert Coleman's *Master Plan of Evangelism*, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne's *The Trellis and the Vine*, or my *Discipling* for more on this topic.

2. CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF EVANGELISM

Second, a Great Commission church will cultivate a culture of evangelism. On the one hand, members know that the gospel will be preached in every weekly gathering. So they are excited to invite their non-Christian friends. The gospel radiates through the singing, the praying, and every sermon.

Are you confident that any non-Christian you bring to your church will hear the gospel? If not, what can you do about it?

On the other hand, a Great Commission church works to train its members in evangelism, because it knows they will collectively see more non-Christians throughout the week than will ever be able to fit in the church building. So "success" in evangelism is not simply bringing your non-Christian friends to church so that they hear the gospel. Success is sharing the gospel with your non-Christian neighbors and friends.

So, the church works to equip its members with evangelism to share the gospel with others. My church does this through adult Sunday Schools devoted to evangelism. I model how to engage with non-Christians in my preaching, particularly in explicitly addressing non-Christians. We try to equip our members by offering them evangelistic tools like "Two Ways to Live" or resources like "Christianity Explained" or "Christianity Explored." We hand out lots of Greg Gilbert's *Who Is Jesus?* to members so they can give to their non-Christian friends. We also share evangelistic opportunities through our Sunday evening meeting. Hearing and praying for other members' evangelistic opportunities encourages people's attempts to spread the good news.

What does the Great Commission mean to you? It means Jesus has called you to be a disciple-maker. He calls you to both evangelize unbelievers and disciple the believers. You should be doing this personally—at home, at work, in your neighborhood, among your friends. You should be doing this in and through your church.

Therefore, use your fellow church members to help you. Invite an elder to lunch and ask him for counsel. Share and pray with your small group. Go out and evangelize with your friends. For more on this topic, read any book by Mack Stiles, especially *Evangelism: How the Whole Church Speaks of Jesus* or my book *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*.

3. WORK TO REACH THE UNREACHED THROUGH MISSIONS

Third, a Great Commission church works to reach the unreached through missions. What's the difference between missions, evangelism, and church planting at home? Missions are what we call evangelism and church planting when they travel across ethnic, cultural, and typically national boundaries.

Jesus commands us to “go and make disciples of all nations.” I have not said much on this topic because many other books cover this idea so well. But it’s hard to know how a church might read this command and not commit itself to taking the gospel to nations that have never heard it before.

No congregation can aim everywhere around the planet. Therefore, I think churches should concentrate their mission efforts on a few places. My own church, for instance, concentrates on several countries in the so-called 10/40 window, which is that region of the Eastern hemisphere between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. It’s the area of the world where there are the fewest percentage of Christians.

If you are a member of our church and are interested in pursuing missions, we can put more of our resources behind you if you go to one of the locations we already invest in. We cannot sponsor a hundred people going to a hundred different places. By that token, we prefer supporting a few missionaries with more money rather than many missionaries with only a little money. That enables the missionaries we support to spend less time raising money and more time doing the work of church planting. Plus, it helps us to have a relationship with them and offer accountability.

Our church works with missionaries directly and through mission organizations like the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board. We also work with amazing groups like Access Partners, who helps to place business people in strategic spots around the world in their business vocations so that they can assist the long-term missionaries on the ground.

What role should you play as an individual Christian helping your church reach the unreached? Indeed, you should pray for your church’s missionaries. Get to know them when they are on furlough. Perhaps look into short-term mission trips that will allow you to support the long-term workers. Read missionary biographies. And maybe think about going.

There is one last thing you and your church can do to reach the unreached: look for internationals in your city. My church works hard at reaching international students, but what international groups live in your city? If you reach them with the gospel in your hometown, there’s a good chance that the gospel will spread back to where they came from.

Look at John Piper’s *Let the Nations Be Glad* for more on this topic.

4. WORK TO STRENGTHEN OTHER CHURCHES

Churches commonly have a mission’s budget line. I think it’s also worth adding a “Fostering Healthy Churches” budget line. Strengthening other churches is a fourth practice of Great Commission churches.

My church uses this line to support several things, such as our pastoral internship program. We pay twelve guys a year to intern with us, most of whom end up pastoring or serving other

churches. We also use the line to support 9Marks, a ministry devoted to building healthy churches.

We intentionally structure our staff so that guys get trained and are sent out. Pastoral assistants serve us for 2 to 3 years and are then expected to go. Assistant pastors serve us for 3 to 5 years and then go. Only the associate pastors and I (with any non-staff pastors or elders) are expected to remain in our church long-term. The rest we equip to go. Our church sponsors weekend conferences, where pastors from around the world join us for our regularly scheduled meetings, several special lecturers, and Q&A times. For the same purposes, I also participate in weekly phone calls with several other networks of pastors from around the world. Each conversation gives me the opportunity to pray and work for healthy churches all around the world.

Much of our work to strengthen other churches through church planting and revitalizing is done in our area. But we do some planting and revitalizing around the world, too. For instance, we sent one brother, John, to a church in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, when that church was looking for a pastor almost a decade ago. God has used John in mighty ways to revitalize that international church. One of his key elders, who helped to bring John there, was Mack, an old friend of mine. Once John and Mack got the church to a healthy place, Mack and another brother, Dave, left the church to plant another church 30 minutes away. We also sent a former pastoral assistant and a former intern to help Mack and Dave in that new work. Simultaneously, we sent another former pastoral intern to plant another church in another city in UAE.

Now, we have three healthy churches up and running in this Muslim country. None of this was a part of some grand plan of ours. We initiated neither the one revitalizing opportunity nor the two planning opportunities. We were there to pray, help, and send financial and human support wherever possible. By the way, a number of our members have relocated their jobs to the UAE to help with the work of these churches. Our church gains in no way other than the sheer joy of seeing God's kingdom expand in this foreign land.

A lot of these examples have focused on what I, as the pastor, have done. But assuming you are an ordinary church member, what can you do to help strengthen other churches, whether in your area or around the world? Obviously, you can pray for other works personally, pray for other works with your family at dinner, or support other works financially.

Indeed, you should be careful about criticizing other churches. Yes, there are places where your church's practices or secondary doctrines might differ from those of other churches. And yes, we have deliberate reasons for those areas of disagreement. I am not telling you to throw those disagreements out the window. But remember that those secondary matters over which your church might disagree with other churches are as never as important as the gospel we all share. So, guard against a critical spirit and look for ways to rejoice in shared gospel partnerships.