

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – The Gospel of John

(SB_JN20B_Some Additional Considerations in Chapter 20)

In our previous study, I developed some principles and documented some applications that were derived from our study of the actions of Jesus' disciples in association with His resurrection. All of Jesus' disciples, including Mary of Magdala, were not expecting the resurrection three days after Jesus' death. We concluded the last study by indicating that we would examine John 20.21-23 in greater depth in this lesson.

The “Great Commission”

Many dispensational theologians and believers understand John 20.21-23 to be connected to other passages that are described collectively as the “Great Commission.” Generally speaking, John 20.21-23 is linked to passages containing similar content such as Matthew 28.16-20; Mark 16.15-18 and Luke 24.46-48.

“Great Commission” Passages		
Passage	Text	Setting
John 20.21-23	So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”	Sunday evening after His resurrection (see Jn 20.19)
Matthew 28.16-20	And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always even to the end of the age.”	On a mountain in Galilee (Matt 28.16) Jesus appears to the eleven and perhaps others. This may have been the appearance to 500 mentioned by Paul (1 Co 15.6). If so, the ones who “doubted” (Matt 28.17) would have been among the 500.
Mark 16.15-18	Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”	Sometime after Jesus' resurrection. However, this passage is within a section of Mark's Gospel that is of disputed authenticity. The last 12 verses of Mark's Gospel is omitted in some manuscripts as early as the 4 th Century.
Luke 24.46-48	Then He said to them, “Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high.”	No specific mention of a location, but the timing seems to be just prior to Jesus' ascension.

The title “Great Commission” that is often used in relation to these passages is a little misleading. It seems to imply that one of Jesus' commissions to His disciples is of greater

importance than others. However, there are other commissions by Jesus that have great significance also. Consider for example Jesus' commissioning of the twelve in Matthew 10. In that commissioning, Jesus appointed them as Apostles and limited their preaching to the gospel of the Kingdom and their audience was specified to be the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Later, as Jesus prays to the heavenly Father on behalf of His disciples in John 17, Jesus mentions the fact that He had sent His disciples into the world just as the Father had sent Him into the world (Jn 17.18). Jesus probably had in mind several occasions such as that which is documented in John 4.38 where Jesus says "I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored."

It is fairly clear from the chart above that Jesus spoke to His followers on more than one occasion. For instance, in John 20.21-23, Jesus speaks on the Sunday evening after His resurrection whereas in Matthew 28.16-20, Jesus speaks on a mountain in Galilee. Mark does not specifically mention a location, but associates the timing of Jesus' commands immediately prior to Jesus' ascension. Luke makes a similar reference as to timing.

Since there had been no communication of the mystery doctrines of the Church, the Body of Christ, until Paul later came on the scene, I am inclined to associate these passages with the Kingdom Age that was to come. Jesus provided further clarification of the Apostle's commission in Acts 1.4-8. In this passage, the Apostles are told how long they are to remain in Jerusalem and where they are to go after Jerusalem. They are to go first to Judea, then to Samaria, then to the uttermost parts of the earth. Therefore, when we piece together all of these commissions, we discover the following facts and features:

- ✓ Whereas up until this point, there was a restricted audience to whom the Gospel of the kingdom was to be preached (e.g. Matt 10), now there was to be a universal preaching of Gospel of the kingdom, e.g. Luke 24.47-49.
- ✓ It was to be carried out in a definite order – Jerusalem and Judea first, then the Gentiles (Acts 1.8 cf. 3.26; 13.46).
- ✓ As new converts were made disciples in obedience to this commission, they were to be baptized (Matt 28.19). Note: water baptism was associated with this Kingdom related commission as an outward manifestation of one's acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and Savior. I do not in any way think that water baptism was ever a requirement for salvation in the sense conveyed by the phrase "baptismal regeneration." Nor, will water baptism ever be a requirement for salvation. However, it was certainly associated with one's profession of faith in that Age. On the contrary, Paul would later state that Christ had not sent him to baptize (1 Co 1.17).
- ✓ Jesus' commands in His commission of the apostles included the command that they teach their converts "to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28.20). Jesus in His death(s) fulfilled the Law and its requirements, so I do not believe that Jesus was instructing His apostles to continue in the observance of the Mosaic Law per se. Rather, I tend to believe that Jesus was referring to Kingdom age principles that He had previously taught His apostles and other disciples on occasion, e.g. Matthew 5-7.
- ✓ The message of this post-resurrection commission certainly appears to be the Gospel of the Kingdom – the gospel that God will establish His kingdom of righteousness and peace under the authority of the Messiah which kingdom was at hand if Israel would repent (cf. Acts 3.19-21).
- ✓ A distinction is to be noted between this commissioning and previous teaching of Jesus. This commission was to be executed beginning in Jerusalem (Jews primarily), then in Judea (Jews primarily), then to the uttermost parts of the earth (Gentiles primarily). In Jesus' teaching during His public ministry, His focus was toward Israel (e.g. Matt 10.5).
- ✓ Nevertheless, we know from other Scripture that Gentiles are definitely a significant part of the Messianic Kingdom and they have never been excluded from God's plan of salvation in any dispensation. The commission in these passages is totally consistent with Jewish responsibility to evangelize during the Age of Israel (prior to and during the

- public ministry of Jesus as well as during the Age of Israel's last 7 years, i.e. the "last days" or the Tribulation or Daniel's 70th Week).
- ✓ In order to validate the message these disciples would proclaim in accordance with their commissioning, they would be empowered to perform miraculous signs to validate their message (Matt 10.8 cf. Mk 16.17-18). It is interesting that during the first several years after Pentecost, the message of the Apostles was in fact accompanied by such miracles. However, later in Paul's ministry, he notes that he had to leave some of his fellow workers sick as well as prescribe remedies for others such as Timothy. The modern charismatic movement is in reality an attempt to revive these signs and bring in the Kingdom program that they were meant to accompany.
 - ✓ If this commission was directed toward Israel, where then do we find God's instructions for the Church? Answer: Paul's epistles. Several passages could be mentioned as "commissions" to the Church, but we might take note of two as examples. Consider the following passages:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began, but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith – to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen. (Rom 16.25-27)

For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again. Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Cor 5.14-21)

- ✓ When Israel rejected the gospel preached by the Apostles in obedience to Jesus' commission, the present administration or dispensation of the Body of Christ was intercalated into human history.
- ✓ When the present age of the Church is completed and God raptures the Church to glory, God will again take up His program with Israel and the commission of the Kingdom will be executed in preparation for the establishment of the Messianic Kingdom on earth.

The Impartation of the Holy Spirit

Why would Jesus breath on His disciples in this post-Resurrection appearance and impart to them the Holy Spirit? Jesus knew they were operating from a position of weakness, not divine power. They needed divine power to sustain them during the next fifty days until they would receive the Holy Spirit at Pentecost when it was poured out upon believers in Jerusalem. The opposition to their ministry and the Truth of the gospel that they now understood and would preach would be incredible. Jesus anticipated this opposition in His earlier commissioning of them in Matthew 10 (special emphasis upon verses 16-26). Also, in that commissioning that is recorded in Matthew 10, it is the Spirit that empowers them (v. 20).

Ability to Forgive Sins?

Jesus makes another interesting statement in verse 23 when He says “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” What did Jesus mean? Do the disciples really have authority to forgive sins? Absolutely not! That is God’s prerogative alone (cf. Mk 2.7; Acts 8.22). However, the Apostles to Israel will be given special authority in the Messianic kingdom for Jesus has indicated that they will be judges over the twelve tribes of Israel (see Matt 19.28). Apparently, in their capacity of judge in the Messianic Kingdom, they will have the delegated authority from Jesus Himself to determine whether a person who sins and who is under their administrative charge is worthy of having the temporal penalty associated with that sin removed. I do not believe that this is a reference to forgiveness in relation to eternal destiny, rather this authority extends only to matters pertaining to kingdom rule and administration on earth.