

A Commission and A Covenant
 (or, “Do You Think Jesus Was
 Teasing and Not Talking to You?”)
 Matthew 28:16-20
 May 18, 2008 – Trinity Sunday
 Oakland Avenue Church-Rock Hill
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Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSV)

- 16 *Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.*
- 17 *When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.*
- 18 *And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*
- 19 *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*
- 20 *and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

I hope that you have had, or one day will have, an opportunity to attend a “**Commissioning Service**” which is provided by our denomination’s Division of International Mission for the out-going missionaries of the church. The one I attended was held in Montreat in Anderson Auditorium, and it was filled with friends, relatives, and fellow-Christians as they joined together in celebration and support for the missionaries.

To be quite honest, that is what I thought about this past week when I read today’s passage which is referred to as “Christ’s Great Commission.”

**“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
 in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit;
 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”**

(Matthew 28:19-20a)

The other thing that I thought about when I read this “Great Commission” passage this past week is an experience which most of you HAVE had: it is the ordination service for a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. I had someone write me an anonymous note following one of our ordination services last year complaining that it was “out of date” and a “waste of time” to have an ordination service. Had I known whom to tell, I would have told them that our Presbyterian constitution, **The Book of Order**, requires that we do it. And probably Christ’s Great Commission lends itself to it as well!

But I have a problem with thinking of the great Commission only in these two situations. And the problem is that doing so leaves most of us out of the picture! Very few of us are publicly commissioned by the church as ministers or missionaries.

On the other hand, are there not countless numbers of us who have privately been commissioned by God to be God’s witness

to the neighbor who lives down the street and is lonely? Or
to the person who is confined to a nursing home? Or
to the sick-room at home? Or
to the down-and-out-on-her-luck woman who ends up
at our community Hope House? Or
to the young person at the Middle School who has no
friends because he is poor or because
she does not speak good English?

Surely, some of us have been commissioned by God to try to influence legislation in state or federal government by writing our representatives on behalf of the uneducated or the unemployed or the handicapped!

Have YOU ever thought about your personal Commission from God? Each of us has one! Do you agree with me? If you do, what is YOUR Commission from God?

Have YOU ever invited someone to worship at Oakland Avenue Church?

**“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit;
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”**
(Matthew 28:19-20a)

That is the Commission of Jesus to you and to me.

But there is something more. It is called a **COVENANT**. It is an agreement. It is a promise. It comes at the end of the Commission. **Jesus says:**

“...lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

The King James Version has it:

“...lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

That is the promise, the agreement, the covenant.

The scene is a bedroom in the home of a middle class Presbyterian family. The old family doctor has tucked his stethoscope into his coat pocket and has snapped-closed his small black bag. The ambulance attendants have rolled the stretcher into the room to pick up the patient, a strapping, healthy-looking 16 year old boy whom the doctor suspects may have POLIOMYELITIS rather than the first-diagnosed summer flu. As the ambulance attendants begin to roll their patient out of the bedroom the teenager asks his dad to give him his red RSV Bible to take with him, explaining, “There might not be anything to read at the hospital.”

**Superstitious, you say? Or, a claim on the covenant?
Jesus said: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”**

It is the Davidson College campus. The old bell on the top of Chambers has “donged” out the hour, again signifying the change of class. Dr. Sam Maloney’s sophomore Bible class has charged out into the hall as usual, only this time leaving behind one student sitting at his desk staring out the window at the budding, new, spring-time leaves on the trees outside. A very close look would discover a twinkle in the eye and the beginning of a smile in the corners of the mouth. The classroom dissection of the Scriptures had been painful at first, seeming obscene in some respects:

- (1) Who would ever have thought to question, the RED sea or the REED sea?
- (2) Was it really mental illness instead of an evil spirit that caused King Saul to go insane?
- (3) Why would God write a book with a synoptic problem?
- (4) How did God really use a whale to change Jonah’s mind about going to the city of Ninevah?

This kind of Bible study certainly was not the way it had been done back in Georgia in the Sunday School of First Presbyterian Church! Is it really possible to lose your faith if you study the Bible too much or too closely? Could it be that Dr. Maloney’s being an integrationist had affected him so that he could no longer interpret the Scriptures correctly?

Questions such as these had caused turmoil within many students, including the one sitting and staring out the window. But now, after almost a year of studying the Bible, things were beginning to take shape. **Faith** was being strengthened rather than destroyed. **Understanding** was going deeper than memorizing John 3:16 or the names of the books of the New Testament. **Revelation** was taking on meaning rather than just being the last book in the Bible.

No wonder there is a twinkle in the eye and a smile beginning on the face of the college student. **The revelation of God is *at last* becoming real!**

**Intellectual stimulation, you say? Or, a claim on the covenant?
Jesus said: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”**

The young minister, only two years out of Columbia Seminary, closed The Book of Common Worship and looked out over the top of the casket into the tear-stained faces in the congregation. The funeral service was fast drawing to a close and it would all be over. It had taken 18 months for Maxie King to die...a long, hard, agonizing, terminal battle with cancer. When the young minister had arrived in Anderson after seminary graduation, Maxie had entered the Anderson hospital to undergo some tests to see why his healthy, 35-year-old body had suddenly started to ache.

The diagnosis had been cancer, and the following months had been hell. All of the King family had rallied around Maxie...his courageous wife, his not-understanding children, his mother and his brothers. The pipeline company employees had taken up a collection near the end and had given the Kings \$5,000.00 to help with the medical expenses. The church had given money, and food, and clothes, and support.

The young minister tightly gripped the corners of the pulpit as the depth of his faith rose to the high pitch of tremendous, emotional testimony as it always did in a funeral service. For, to the

minister, this was where the Christian faith spoke eloquently and victoriously. His voice carried clearly throughout the room as he made the Declaration of Hope:

My friends, as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I declare unto you that there is more than the grave. And in this we have our hope. Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. My friends, that is good news! That is what the Gospel is all about. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. Amen.

The funeral was over. Tears came to the eyes of the minister. He really believed what he had just said.....again.

**Emotionalism, you say? Or, a claim on the covenant?
Jesus said: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."**

It is the corridor of the Henrietta Eggleston Hospital. Dr. Brinsfield is the kind of doctor you like: a compassionate but "shoot-straight-from-the-hip" specialist in pediatric cardiology. She and her colleague, Clemson graduate Dr. Jim Sutherland, stand in front of you just as Dr. Brinsfield has finished saying:

**"Your little girl is not going to live more than a few hours;
the tests confirm what we had suspected:
she was born with only a half of a heart."**

The feeling of unreality is everywhere. You hear the words, and you understand them, and yet you don't hear them, and you don't understand them.

Friends have gathered downstairs in the waiting room along with members of your family. Telephone calls have gone out carrying the sad news that your ten day old daughter is dying...the beautiful little girl who had been so healthy at birth that she and her mother had gotten to go home a day early.

Then the questions of death must be turned into decisions. Where will you bury her? Which funeral home will you call? Whom will you ask to lead the worship service?

Underneath all of the "surface stuff," deep down inside your gut, the question "**Why?**" begins to form. But, then, amazingly, it does not take shape. Instead, in its place, a strong, unyielding faith takes hold, and you suddenly are aware, in the midst of all of the pain, that you are thankful to God that, for a little while, you have been a daddy!

**Rationalization, you say? Or, a claim on the covenant?
Jesus said: "Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."**

The passage of Scripture in Matthew for today is known as the passage with the Commission and the Covenant. It is what is known also as a "Trinitarian" passage in that it speaks of our One God in the persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.
Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them
in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit;
teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...”**

(Matthew 28:19-20a)

It seems to me that there are at least three things one can do concerning the Commission of Jesus.

- (1) You can **reject** the commission, and there are some of us who have; or
- (2) You can **await** the commission, and there are some of us who are waiting and learning the great discipline of patience; or
- (3) You can **accept** the commission and get on with being God’s person.

Only YOU can wrestle with where YOU are in this process of the Commission of Jesus!

It is comforting to know that the Commission of Jesus never comes without the Covenant of Jesus that goes with it.

Jesus said: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

God has promised that God will be with us always.

I accept that on face value.

For, you see: I was the boy with Polio;
I was the struggling Davidson College student;
I was the young minister leading the service for Maxie King;
I was Mary Leslie’s daddy.

God has promised that God will be with us always.

Do YOU believe that?