

Extent and Limitation of the Great Commission in Inner City Church Work

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We are gathered here for our Synod's first Inner City Mission Seminar. Its general objective is to gird our inner city congregations for mission outreach and to this end to share problems, experiences, and goals. You have asked me to start out this seminar with a theological essay, one on the extent and limitation of the great commission in inner city church work, i.e. the work cut out for our inner city congregations.

All true theology is based on the Holy Scriptures. A *theological* essay on any subject should therefore endeavor to set forth what Scripture has to say on the subject, nothing less but also nothing more. In that sense I also understand your assignment of a theological essay on the extent and limitations of the great commission in inner city church work. Beyond question this is a good way to begin an Inner City Mission Seminar. When we consider any phase of church work, it is well to know from the start what Scripture has clearly settled for us and what is left open for our Christian judgment. When Scripture puts something within the scope of the great commission, then all debate as to whether it is to be pursued or not can fall away. Our deliberations can then focus wholly on how we can best pursue it and what lies within our ability to do about it. On the other hand, if God in His Word has set any limitations to the application of the great commission to any phase of church work, we will from the start want to be aware of these limitations and bear them carefully in mind in all our planning.

Yet Scripture does not only enlighten and instruct us with binding precepts and normative directives. It also gives us much guidance in doing church work by the helpful examples and illustrations which it offers in its historical accounts. These accounts do not necessarily tell us how we *must* proceed but rather how we *may* indeed proceed. Thus they give us helpful suggestions as to what is wholly in keeping with the Lord's will, what proved very beneficial for His kingdom, and what holds out the promise of His manifest blessing. Also such scriptural guidance will we gladly welcome as we begin our deliberations on inner city mission outreach.

As with the help of Scripture we seek to determine the extent and limitation of the great commission relative to inner city church work, the work of our inner city congregations, we do well to begin with calling to our mind what we mean when we speak of inner city congregations, what we have in mind when we speak of inner city church work, and what the great commission really enjoins us to do.

As the name implies, our inner city congregations are those which are found in the heart and center of our great cities. These churches, for the most part, were there as these cities grew beyond those central areas. Hence, they are generally some of our oldest congregations; they grew as our cities grew. They are generally congregations which have a past history of prominence, of great strength, of outstanding leadership which they supplied to our church body, and of considerable resources in the past for doing the Lord's work. They frequently still have buildings and facilities which were once supplied in the hope that the role which they then held would continue indefinitely. Yet the younger generation of those whom they served in the past have in the meantime moved out of the congregation's immediate area. For various reasons, especially also social and economic ones, they have established their homes and their church affiliations in suburban areas. Those members still remaining are apt to be in the older age bracket, generally also less favored with earthly means. Thus these congregations are in danger of dying out, and will inevitably die out if they do not replenish their ranks with a new program of outreach. Yet these congregations are not in areas void of people, but are likely to be located in some of the most impacted population centers of our country. They are found in an area abounding with souls, all precious and paid for by the Savior's blood. These people are, however, generally of a different color and complexion, of other ethnic origin, and of a different social and economic background than those to

which our inner city congregations have ministered in the past. With inner city church work we mean the work of drawing these people who are at hand into our churches through the gospel and of then ministering to them with the gospel for their continued growth and strengthening in Christian faith and life.

But what is the great commission which our Lord and Savior has given to His believers, given to His believers likewise as they are gathered around Word and Sacrament in Christian congregations, including inner city congregations? When the risen Savior appeared to His disciples on the evening of Easter, He said to them: “As my father hath sent me, even so send I you.” The heavenly Father had sent Him to perform the greatest of all tasks, one which He, the incarnate Son, alone could perform. It was the task of redeeming sinful mankind. Christ did perform that task. As He appeared to His disciples on the evening of Easter, He had brought it to a triumphant completion for all times. With the greeting: “Peace be unto you,” He now invited them to rejoice in that completed work, to find personal comfort and salvation in it for time and eternity. Yet having thus greeted them, He called their attention to the work which they were now to perform. In the power of the Holy Spirit they were now to proclaim the life-giving, faith-engendering message of His blood-bought forgiveness to others. They were to preach and teach the gospel, so that sinners everywhere might become partakers of salvation and as such be sanctified ever more fully in that faith, and strengthened and preserved in it unto eternal life. This is the great commission which is still entrusted to each and every Christian. It is still the one great task, the only task, and the whole task *specifically* committed to Christ’s church of believers.

On the evening of Easter the risen Savior spoke of the assignment “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” In Matthew 28:19–20 He reworded the commission for His believers by saying: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (RSV). Before His ascension the Savior, according to Mark 16:15, told His disciples: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”

None of these brief summarizations of the great commission mean to restrict our proclamation in such a way that anything that is found in His revealed Word is thereby excluded from our task of witnessing. Jesus, however, binds everything up with the preaching of His gospel, for every part of God’s Word somehow stands in close relation to the central gospel message, serves this message, and the purpose for which it is to be brought to sinners. That purpose, as already indicated, is a twofold one. His believers are to preach and teach the gospel, first of all, that through their testimony ever more sinners may be brought to saving faith in Christ, to enjoy forgiveness of sins and salvation. Yet the gospel is also to be brought to those who have already come to faith. Note that in Matthew 28 Jesus states that as people are won as His disciples, they are then to be taught to observe all things whatsoever He has entrusted to us. Those who have been won for Christ by our testimony of the gospel are then to be gathered around Word and Sacrament, that is, they are to be gathered in Christian congregations where they may regularly be nourished and built up by the means of grace in Christian peace and joy, in Christian comfort, in Christian living, and in Christian hope.

For whom are the benefits of the great commission with its twofold purpose intended? Scripture’s answer, given to us from the Savior’s own lips, sets no restrictions. With the gospel we are to make disciples of *all* nations. On the evening of Easter Jesus said that the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His Name to *all* nations. According to the Mark passage, we are to preach the gospel to all creatures. The creatures coming into consideration are all human beings, all of them in need of forgiveness. Scripture speaks very clearly through the Apostle Paul when it tells us: “There is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:22–23). Scripture is equally clear when through the same apostle it tells us, I Timothy 2:4, that “God would have all men to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth.” The great commission knows of no restrictions as to race, or color, or ethnic origin, or social position, or economic station. If then our inner city congregations are surrounded with people who differ in any or several of these respects from the people to whom these congregations have ministered in the past, this has no bearing whatsoever with respect to the great commission and the obligation which this commission places upon us as Christ’s believers.

All this is underscored by scriptural example as it narrates the initial growth of the church through the execution of the great commission. Into the mother church at Jerusalem the exalted Savior through the testimony of His believers gathered both rich and poor. Some were so poor that they were dependent upon the liberal gifts of their fellow Christians for their most basic needs, their daily sustenance. Others were wealthy enough to have had houses and land to sell so that they could lay the proceeds at the feet of the apostles for distribution among the needy that none in the church might suffer need.

Gathered in that first church through the gospel were great numbers of very humble and ordinary people who for a long time remained objects of Christian charity. Yet, among those won for the Savior and His salvation were also leaders among men. Among them were counselors like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, many priests who believed, and those of the sect of the Pharisees who came to faith, Cornelius the centurion, Manaen the foster brother of Herod. Such variety of social station within the church continued also as the church was extended to the Gentiles through the mission work of St. Paul. On the one hand Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” On the other hand, the Book of Acts tells us of the jailer of Philippi, of Lydia the prosperous seller of purple, of Apollos the eloquent Alexandrian, of Luke the physician, of Erastus, a city chamberlain, who were likewise won by the gospel.

Paul’s shortest epistle served the express purpose of binding together in the common bond of Christian fellowship the master Philemon and the penitent runaway slave Onesimus. The Pentecost epistle serves as a constant reminder of the great ethnic variety that existed in the first Christian congregation from its very inception. For the multitude to whom Peter preached on that first Pentecost day in the name of all the apostles and from whom the Lord gathered the first three thousand into His church are described as comprising “Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians” (Acts 2:9–11).

Scripture does not hide from us that such diversity did cause passing tensions also in the apostolic church, even as our inner city congregations are prone to fear that converts from varied ethnic backgrounds might cause congregational tensions. The special office of deacon was created and the appointment of the first seven was undertaken to overcome the murmuring of the Hellenists against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Scripture relates to us how the very Apostle Peter had to be carefully prepared by a special divine vision before he was fully ready and free to bring the glad tidings of the gospel to the Roman centurion Cornelius and to his gentile household. The evangelist Philip was directly sent by God to bring the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch so that he and the church might learn that the gospel was meant also for the Ethiopians. The first conversions among the Samaritans, after Saul’s persecution at Jerusalem brought the Christian witness to Samaria, were graced by special miraculous signs and charismatic gifts that the apostles as well as the entire church might overcome all reluctance in considering the Samaritans as objects of mission outreach. Even the Apostle John, the apostle of love, seemingly had had a prejudice against Samaritans to overcome. For why had his reaction been so strong when a Samaritan village refused entrance to the Savior and His disciples? Right there and then he had been ready to call down fire from heaven upon them for their destruction. He had shown much greater longsuffering for his own countrymen who had daily met the Savior with bitter opposition and rejection.

These examples and many others which we might adduce should all remind us that any prejudices which we may have against extending our mission outreach in our inner city congregations to people of different ethnic background, of different race and color, of different social and economic station do not warrant that we narrow the scope and extent of the great commission. All such prejudices need rather to be overcome in us through the gospel as they were overcome in the apostolic church. Tensions which could well arise are not an excuse for avoiding mission outreach, but problems which the church must be willing to face, and like every other problem solve with the power of the gospel.

The great commission is indeed broad and deep in its scope: “Make disciples of *all* nations.” “Go into *all* the world and preach the gospel.” Obviously any individual congregation and even a single church body,

like our Wisconsin Synod, cannot do justice to the entire scope. On the other hand, the Lord has not told us in Scripture whom we are to select for our mission outreach with the gospel. If then our inner city congregations make every effort to participate in the support of the home mission and world mission programs which have been opened and those which are already on the waiting list, would this not warrant neglecting the inner core? Could not the argument be pressed: The mission work that we *are* doing as a church body in the fields that the Lord is manifestly blessing exhaust our means and our manpower? Is it therefore expedient and a matter of good judgment to add an additional emphasis to our mission program, namely, that of intensive inner city church work? Is this wise inasmuch as the goal of relatively swift self support may not be readily attained? Should we not keep in mind that we still lack rich experience for this kind of work? Is not great caution in place, since we will be facing many new problems for which we still do not have ready solutions, and we may still have to gain them by a laborious process of trial and error?

It is indeed true that Scripture does not give us any precise directives as to how we are to divide up our mission efforts and where we are to expend them. Yet this much can be said on the basis of scriptural example: Strongly suggested is a special obligation toward missionary outreach just over against those who are near at hand, over against those with whom we must daily brush elbows if we do not artificially avoid doing so. Strongly suggested is a special obligation toward those who are there where we not only are but where we have been for a long time.

Note that Jesus told His disciples before His ascension: “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” Christ’s first disciples, all men of the Jewish nation, were to begin executing the great commission in their own nation and that at its capital Jerusalem, so dear to every Jewish heart; they were to begin there even though this was where the rejection of the Savior had reached its climax and where they had crucified the Lord of glory. From there the spreading of the gospel was to be extended to all of Judea. Yet even not from there was the gospel immediately to be carried into the Gentile world. First Samaria, whose inhabitants had always been close to Judea, was to hear the gospel, even though the Jews had despised the Samaritans so close at hand, and dubbed someone a Samaritan when they wanted to heap a special insult upon him. For his own person, Jesus had explained that He was sent to minister only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel during His humble earthly life and that the time for the Gentiles would set in when His redemptive work would be finished. Even so, Jesus did bring the gospel message to the Samaritan woman who happened to be there when He came to Jacob’s well. He also testified to the large company of Samaritans who subsequently came out to Him upon her believing testimony. Jesus dealt the same way with the Syrophenician woman who happened to be at hand while He was carrying out His God-assigned ministry.

According to the same principle, Scripture expects us to bring the gospel first of all to those who are near at hand. We are to begin with the members of our own household. Scripture tells us how Andrew, when he had found the Savior, sought out Peter, his brother, and brought him to Christ, and how John brought his brother, James, to Jesus, and Philip his friend Nathanael. Even when it comes to fulfilling the law of love to the neighbor that we help him in his needs as we would want to be helped in ours, Jesus guides us in the account of the good Samaritan to exercise this love in a practical way by showing mercy and compassion to him whose needs are placed immediately before our eyes. How, then, could we think of forgetting this principle when it comes to helping others in their greater spiritual need? It would be a strange mission zeal for our inner city congregations to be deeply concerned only for the souls’ salvation of those in more distant home and world mission fields, and at the same time to feel no compelling obligation to bring the saving gospel to those who are there where they themselves are and where they have been for a long time.

It is obvious that it does not lie within the means of our Wisconsin Synod to take care of all the inner core work of our country. We do also have other obligations. We have an obligation to follow up our own people with spiritual ministrations as tasks and responsibilities induce them to move to other parts of our country. We have obligations to all the mission fields into which the Lord has already called us and in which He has permitted us to work. But on the basis of scriptural example and general directive it appears impossible to discount our obligations especially to certain inner city areas like that of Milwaukee and several others where

we have congregations and have had them for a long time. It will be one of the tasks of this seminar to use good Christian judgment as to how to line up this obligation with our other mission obligations and as to assigning to it the emphasis that it should have and that we can give to it. This mission seminar task also includes giving earnest thought to the aid that all of the congregations of our synod ought to offer to their sister congregations in the inner city that they may be able to fulfill the manifest obligation that they have to devote themselves to inner city work.

So far we have occupied ourselves only with the extent of the great commission in inner city work. We have said little about any limitation of the great commission at this work except for the limitation that other mission obligations and our own resources in manpower and means impose upon us. Are there any other limitations? Who in the inner city areas are to be the object of our evangelism thrust and of our continued ministrations with Word and Sacrament after they have been won for Christ? Does Scripture point out any limitations to us? Yes, Scripture does point to one limitation. Only the unchurched in the inner city areas can be the legitimate object of our evangelism thrust. Those who profess active membership in a congregation which we must still recognize as a Christian congregation, though not necessarily as an orthodox Christian congregation, are not to come into consideration for our mission outreach. This would mean all those who belong to a Christian congregation where Christ is still proclaimed as the Son of God and the Savior of men. This is quite in keeping with what we confess in our synodical explanatory catechism on the basis of Scripture. Those who have a shepherd of whom we must still acknowledge that in his ministrations he likewise lets Christ be the Son of God and the Savior of men have a relation to this shepherd for which he bears the responsibility before God so that we may not interfere with this relation. For Scripture does speak clearly of such a bond existing between a Christian pastor and those entrusted to his care when it tells us through the Apostle Paul: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood." This does not mean that we do not have any obligation of testimony at all toward such people, if for one reason or another we are brought together with them and an occasion arises to confess God's truth and to warn against pernicious error. Also for such occasions the Scriptural exhortation applies for us: "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (I Pet. 3:15). We also do not want to discount or minimize the difficulty with which we are confronted in the present era of confessional deterioration in the matter of determining which congregations and which ministry we still can and must recognize as Christian in spite of the errors in which they are involved.

Yet this much is certain that the above mentioned limitation is one of which Scripture apprises us with regard to the exercise of the great commission also in inner city work.

Now that we have considered the limitations of the great commission in inner city work, but foremostly and above all its manifest extent of application, we will want to close with a note of inspiration also for this work entrusted to us. Let us seek inspiration from the Savior Himself. Let Him inspire us, first of all, to share His deep satisfaction in winning a sinner for salvation, a privilege that does come to us again and again also in inner city work. To this end we want to call to our mind the occasion in St. John's Gospel when the Samaritan woman left her water pot at Jacob's well and hurried to her people to tell them about Jesus. Almost immediately thereafter the disciples returned from the city with food. Yet, as they began to eat that food it puzzled them that Jesus did not join them, not even upon their urging: "Master, eat." They knew that He, too, had been weary, thirsty, and hungry when they first came to Jacob's well before He had sent them to the city to get supplies. Very significantly Jesus told them: "I have meat to eat ye know not of." Knowing nothing of His conversation with the Samaritan woman and its outcome, the disciples did not understand. Yet we know what Jesus meant.

In the Samaritan woman Jesus had met a soul lost in sin and wretched in its bondage. Thus His Savior's heart had reached out to help her, reached out to her even though she was an adulteress and a social outcast. He had told her about the living water which He had to give, water that could quench all the thirst of her soul forever. He meant, of course, His gospel gift of the forgiveness of sin, and the gifts of peace, joy, eternal hope, and strength for godliness which would flow from such forgiveness. As a true physician of souls He had made her conscious of her guilt, her sin, her wretchedness, her condemnation before God, and of her dire need for His

living water of free pardon. He had ended up by telling her that He Himself was the Christ, the promised Redeemer of sinners. With true divine empathy He had entered upon her problem and imparted the perfect solution. He had won a sinner for salvation. She had hurriedly left, filled in her newly found faith with the ardent desire to tell others about Him. Thus to do His Savior work and to see it crowned with success gave Jesus the deepest satisfaction and joy. It was to Him like food and drink; it was so sweet and rich and satisfying that while His soul still feasted on it, the needs of the body, its weariness, hunger, and thirst were, for the time being, pushed into the background. They lost their immediate importance for the time being. In this sense He had said, "I have meat, (that is, food) to eat, that ye know not of." As you and I rest our salvation and our eternal hope in Christ's vicarious redemption, He will become for us also an inspiring example: In the thankfulness of humble faith, being active in spreading the gospel of Christ will become a necessity also for us like food and drink. We will find our deepest satisfaction in winning sinners for salvation, be it through personal evangelism or through fostering and supporting our Synod's gospel program of home missions and world missions and inner city missions.

As Jesus was still speaking to His disciples at Jacob's well, He lifted up His eyes toward Sychar and saw a great number of white-garmented Samaritans coming out to Him through the green grain fields. He knew that they were coming to Him because the Samaritan woman had told them that He was the Christ, the promised Messiah. He knew that He would have an opportunity to assure them that He was indeed the long awaited Savior. The sight of such a harvest of souls which He could gather in and preserve to eternal life filled the heart of Jesus with the highest joy and delight. With such a harvest in prospect He could forget all about the earthly harvest which was still four months in waiting. He saw a much more precious harvest of souls white for reaping to eternal life. His heart was thrilled. That is why He said to His disciples, "Say not ye there are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? Behold I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look unto the fields; for they are white already to harvest." These approaching Samaritans were in the eyes of Jesus the firstfruits of the great harvest of souls among the Gentiles which was to begin when His work of redemption would be finished.

This worldwide harvest of souls, in which our Savior found His great joy, is still going on. Our inner cities also provide a glimpse of it, even as do our home and our world mission fields. May we be thrilled with this harvest as our Savior was. May we in joyful, thankful faith also shift our attention from the earthly harvests which are so prone to have all our attention. May we shift our attention away from excessive preoccupation with earthly riches, with social and economic advances, and may we instead lose and forget ourselves again and again in this great harvest of souls which is going on through the proclamation of the gospel. May we become ever more eager to have a rich part in it, with our personal testimony, with our liberal mission gifts, and with our fervent mission prayers.