

The
GOSPEL
COMMISSION

Recovering God's Strategy
for Making Disciples

Michael Horton



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Introduction

A gracious disturbance is at work in the world today. With the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the age to come has broken into this present evil age. It's not business as usual. God isn't coming alongside us to empower us for our projects of personal and social transformation. God did not become flesh and suffer an ignominious death at our hands so that we could have sprawling church campuses, programs, and budgets. There's something more profound—more radical—going on. But what is it?

In Christ, God has broken into our world of sin and death and is even now bringing the powers of the age to come into the present age by his Word and Spirit. It is a profound disturbance of our lives and our world: disorienting, dividing, and delivering us from the supposed givens of what we thought were “reality.”

But for that reason, it's a *gracious* disturbance. God is interrupting the regular news to bring us a special report and through us is bringing this report to the ends of the earth. Around this news from heaven the Spirit is gathering a colony or embassy of grace in a world of fear, guilt, rebellion, and distraction. Jesus's mandate in the Great Commission is a lodestar for refocusing our mission as Christians and as churches on the central calling for this time between Christ's two comings.

Why another book on the Great Commission? Like others, I am concerned that we are being distracted in our churches today by “mis-

sion creep.” According to Wikipedia, mission creep is “the expansion of a project or mission beyond its original goals, often after initial successes.” The term was originally coined in a 1993 *Washington Post* article on the UN Peacekeeping mission in Somalia, in which the writer argued that a humanitarian mission turned into a military operation which did not have clearly spelled-out goals and for which the soldiers on the ground were not prepared.¹

In *Christless Christianity*, I paint an unflattering but documented portrait of the message that seems to pervade contemporary churches. Following closely on its heels, *The Gospel-Driven Life* focuses on the core Christian message and its radical implications for our lives in the world. My goal in *The Gospel Commission* is to call us away from mission creep, centering our discipleship and our churches on the very specific sources, goals, strategies, and methods that Christ mandated for this time between his two comings.

The Empire to Which We Are Sent

When I was growing up, nearly everyone in my immediate and extended family on both sides was raised a Southern Baptist or at least an evangelical of some sort. Today, some are hostile toward Christian institutions and official doctrine. Others affirm a childhood experience of “getting saved” with fond recollection, even if this experience is apparently irrelevant to their current beliefs and commitments. But when the conversation moves to the deep end—namely, to doctrine and discipleship (especially in relation to the church)—everybody crawls out of the pool as if someone had cried, “Shark!” Kept to the level of slogans and experiences, “spirituality” is fine. The problem is “organized religion,” which usually means anything associated with actual beliefs and practices that are shared by a specific, concrete, and visible community of Christians. Some of these relatives have not been to church in years but would be deeply offended at any insinuation that they might not be Christians. So we mostly avoid the topic. They’re family, but when it comes to the faith, it’s easier to talk to a stranger on a plane. I could relate similar stories of friends with whom I graduated from a conservative evangelical college.

These experiences are far from unique in our culture today. This story will resonate with people who grew up in Roman Catholic, Orthodox, mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Pentecostal families.

In fact, it's interesting how many of America's pop culture icons have a conservative Protestant background. Ted Turner, the CNN founder who famously said "Christianity is for losers," attended a Christian school in his youth. Actress and New Age advocate Shirley MacLaine was raised in a staunch Southern Baptist home. *Playboy's* Hugh Hefner relates, "I was a very idealistic, very romantic kid in a very typically Midwestern Methodist repressed home. There was no show of affection of any kind, and I escaped to dreams and fantasies produced, by and large, by the music and the movies of the '30s."²

Raised in a Progressive Missionary Baptist church, Oprah Winfrey loved to quote Bible verses and relate Bible stories—sometimes even in church, where she says she began her public career before an audience. In fact, her friends at school dubbed her "Preacher Woman." As LaTonya Taylor relates, "To her audience of more than 22 million mostly female viewers, she has become a postmodern priestess—an icon of church-free spirituality."³

In a denomination in which liberal is the new traditionalism, retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong boasts appearances on *Larry King Live*, attacking the Christian creed with a blend of sarcasm and poor scholarship. The author of *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (which, as it turns out, means Christianity), he was raised in a fundamentalist home and church.

Similar hostility toward "organized religion" (especially Christian orthodoxy) was evident among the pioneers of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. Thinkers like Kant, Lessing, Hume, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche were reared in evangelical pietism. Many were children of pastors, and most of them even pursued theological studies in preparation for the ministry. Successive waves washed away layers of Christian consciousness: from the Christ of the creed to the inner experience and piety of Jesus as moral example, to the rejection finally of both—in favor of nature-mysticism or atheism.

As Unitarian rationalism spawned a homegrown Romantic movement known as American transcendentalism, writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson called readers to turn away from everything external in religion—Scripture, church, creeds, and sacraments—and fix their attention on "the infinitude of the private man," as Emerson put it. Not even God stands outside of us and over us, but God is simply the divine energy that pulses through all living things. In his famous "Harvard Divinity School Address" (1858), Emerson announced,

The Puritans in England and America, found in the Christ of the Catholic Church, and in the dogmas inherited from Rome, scope for their austere piety, and their longings for civil freedom. But their creed is passing away, and none arises in its room. I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling, that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going. It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good, and the fear of the bad. In the country, neighborhoods, half parishes are signing off, to use the local term.⁴

Meanwhile, on the American frontier, revivalism was also turning attention from God and his grace to the inner experience, free will, and moral action of the human being.

In many ways, this long march of secularism (or at least “spiritual but not religious” approaches) should be seen less in terms of the invasion of a foreign army than as a teenage rebellion in the evangelical house.

Of course, part of the hostility is directed at the particular claims of the faith, but I would venture to say that most of those who have turned to eclectic spiritualities, agnosticism, or atheism today are not reacting against a clearly understood Christian creed. Often they refer to their upbringing as involving strictness combined with hypocrisy. For a host of reasons—real and imagined—growing up in a Christian environment is perceived by many of our contemporaries as a negative experience.

Surrounded by people who are pretty much like ourselves, we can easily see the mission field as a distant place to which we send heralds. However, all of that has changed. Our lives are bound up socially with non-Christians. Some have experienced the church as a negligible or even harmful influence in their past. Many of us have experienced enough of that ourselves to sympathize with them. Like any family, churches can be embassies of grace or prisons—and much in between. However, in my own experience at least, today we are more likely to encounter people (at least those of post–baby boom generations) who only know “Christianity” from TV preachers and political debates.

The challenges that have drawn me back to a close examination of the Great Commission are not primarily external attacks of “secular humanists” but a gradual decline in the health of evangelical witness in American churches. Secularization—that is, the gradual conformity of our thinking, beliefs, commitments, and practices to the pattern of this fading age—is not just something that happens *to* the church; it

is something that happens *in* the church. In fact, it's difficult to think of secularism as anything other than a Christian heresy.

In its lust for cultural relevance, mainline Protestantism squandered its inheritance. Conservative Protestants today are also in danger, not so much of being attacked by New Atheists as of surrendering a robust confidence in God and his Word to a culture of marketing and entertainment, self-help, and right-wing and left-wing political agendas. If mainline bodies sold their birthright to the high culture, are evangelicals in danger of selling theirs to popular culture?

The growth of evangelical churches throughout the baby boomer era has tapered off and shows signs of precipitous decline. According to one study, 60 percent of American young adults raised in the church are no longer active participants (much less members) in their twenties.⁵ While many Christians abandoned mainline Protestant denominations for evangelical churches, a growing trend is reported of evangelicals quitting church altogether.⁶ While cautioning against overly dramatic conclusions, researcher Ed Stetzer observes, "Southern Baptists, composing the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, have apparently peaked and are trending toward decline. The same is true of most evangelical denominations." He adds, "The bigger concern is that people who identify themselves as Christians (and even evangelicals) do not evidence the beliefs historically held by Christians."⁷

Instead of reaching the lost, are we losing the reached? Or are those reared in our own churches being truly reached in the first place? Do they know what they believe and why they believe it? Are we making disciples even of our own members—our own children—much less the nations?

Add to this massive group of burned-out Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Americans the rediscovery of Eastern religions in the 1970s and the burgeoning religious diversity of our neighborhoods, and we have a pretty good idea of the challenges and opportunities before us as we hear and explore our Lord's Great Commission.

But the promise is not only "for you and for your children"; it is also "for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself" (Acts 2:39). The "other" is no longer an abstraction, an anonymous category of "the lost," in which religious identity often gets caught up with ethnic, cultural, and even political differences. Similar to the early days of the church, it is more apparent today that "those who are far away" may be living next door or even under our

own roof. In this context, we can no longer just *assume* that these wonderful people who enrich our lives are “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). We have to be *convinced* of this all over again, persuaded by the clear testimony of Scripture. The fact of religious pluralism has always been with us, but now we are staring it in the face in our daily lives.

The Embassy of Peace

It’s not surprising that the church shares with secular politics terms like “mission,” “ministry,” and “ministers.” In state diplomacy, a mission can be a specific course of action or a permanent office, such as an embassy or consulate. The same is true of the church. It is both a *people* deployed with a task and a *place* where God is at work through official structures and offices. Diplomats, ambassadors, official heralds appointed by the head of state to announce something of great significance for individuals and for the whole world—this is the analogy that the New Testament employs for the work of fulfilling the Great Commission. Even the term “gospel” was a secular term in Greek that referred to the good news that an official was sent to announce back in the capitol: namely, that there had been victory on the battlefield.

Ambassadors do not create their own policies, usurping the role of their head of state. They do not negotiate the terms of the peace treaty, but communicate them. They are under orders. Ambassadors aren’t merely private individuals who share their personal beliefs and experiences with others. They do not send themselves, but are officially commissioned and sent. The apostles were sent directly from Christ, as “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16; see also Luke 1:2), while the ordinary ministers like Timothy were trained and then called and commissioned by Christ “when the council of elders [*presbyterion*] laid their hands on you” (1 Tim. 4:14). Christ still sends his ambassadors out on his mission, proclaiming the Good News, baptizing, and teaching everything that Christ commanded. And he still calls his whole body to witness to God’s saving love in Jesus Christ through word and deed.

The Great Commission is given within the wider context of the covenant of grace that was initiated with God’s promise of a redeemer in Genesis 3:15, reaffirmed in the covenant with Abraham, and fulfilled in the new covenant. In the political treaties of the ancient Near East,

a great king (emperor) would graciously deliver a smaller kingdom from invaders and then incorporate that kingdom into his empire. In these treaties, there was a clause that gave the lesser king the right to invoke the great king in the case of future threats. It was referred to as “calling on the name of (the great king).”

This political relationship became the template for the covenant of grace. Quoting Joel 2:32, Paul declares, “For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Rom. 10:13). We do not have to attempt to ascend to the heavens or descend into the depths to attain salvation; rather, God comes down to us, not only rescuing us but delivering the Good News that reconciles us to him. Paul adds the following links in the chain of his argument:

How are they to call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:14–15, 17)

The church is Christ’s embassy in the world. Elsewhere Paul relates,

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 5:18–6:2)

Like their Lord, the directly appointed ambassadors of Christ were beaten, flogged, imprisoned, and even martyred. Instead of calling on the name of the Lord through his delegated representatives, the kingdoms of this age responded to God’s embassy with hostility. And yet the Great Commission bore and continues to bear fruit among Jews and Gentiles to this day. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel,

for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).

After his resurrection, our Lord commissioned his apostles to go throughout the earth making disciples by preaching the gospel, baptizing, and teaching everything he has delivered for faith and practice. There is a lot of rich substance packed into that mandate. Motivated by a sense of urgency, Christians for two millennia have made enormous sacrifices—including their own lives—in order to bring the saving message of Christ to every person on earth.

Our Embassy to the Empires of This Age

With new challenges come new opportunities. In many ways, this is a better time to take the Great Commission more seriously. Once we begin to see ourselves as belonging to a minority within a predominantly pagan society with vestiges of cultural Christianity, we are freed up to reorganize our beliefs and practices in a more distinctly biblical pattern. Discipleship cannot mean going with the flow; it requires swimming against the current not only of contemporary culture but often of contemporary church life and experience.

The central point of this book is that there is no mission without the church and no church without the mission. As evangelicals we have tended to see the church and its public ministry of Word, sacrament, and oversight of spiritual and material needs of the body as “maintenance” for those who were evangelized once upon a time. They’re already in. But evangelism and mission have to do with going outside the church and its ministry to say and do something else. The cleavage between church and mission is often stated explicitly in evangelistic appeals: “I’m calling you to believe in Jesus, not to join a church.” But what does it mean to make disciples—what does that really look like on the ground? Furthermore, how do we deal with the challenges of religious pluralism and the rising sentiment in evangelical circles that salvation does not require explicit faith in Christ? In the following chapters we explore the strategies Christ instituted that make the church his mission in the world—for lifelong believers as well as strangers to the gospel—as well as the relationship of evangelism and social justice. Along the way I interact with evangelicals today who are offering a different interpretation of the Great Commission.

The central mandate of the Great Commission—to proclaim the gospel to everyone in the world—used to be taken for granted by Christians, especially by evangelicals. Convinced that salvation comes through hearing and believing the gospel, generations of ordinary Christians left the comfort of kith and kin to hazard unfamiliar and often unwelcoming engagement with those who had not yet heard the Good News. Many of my generation grew up singing “We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations,” and we felt a connection to the missionaries who returned on furlough with their slides and reports. They were like heroes to us kids.

We also had a sense, however naïve, that we lived in a Christian country and sent missionaries to other nations where Christ is not known. Of course, we knew that the light was dimming in secular Europe, but a vaguely conservative religiosity and morality numbed us to the reality that our own American culture is entering that twilight. Alternating between fundamentalisms and liberalisms of various sorts, American Christians nevertheless seem increasingly aware of the reality that the West, including the United States, hosts a religiously diverse culture. Sociologists like Peter Berger have pointed out that modernity led to radically different trajectories in Europe and America. Europe has become secularized: modernity and unbelief went hand in hand. Yet American religion has thrived under the conditions of modernity. Liberal democracy, free enterprise, pragmatism, consumerism, and the triumph of a therapeutic worldview have been seen as allies rather than enemies of evangelical faith and mission. Somehow we adapted instead of becoming extinct. Or so it seemed until recently.

So amid the whirl of spiritual movements in America today, the question is properly raised: how much of this is recognizably *Christian*? “But it’s *working!*” no longer resonates as it did only a couple of decades ago. As self-described evangelicals fall away from regular church attendance and many churches themselves seem distracted from their primary calling, the light is dimming and the salt is losing its savor. Increasingly, Christians in North America who want to recover vital faith and practice recognize that they too are “strangers and exiles” (Heb. 11:13) in this present age. And actually, this recognition may be a healthy prelude to a fresh era of mission.

Throughout this book, I will be interacting with primarily Western voices and trends, especially those in North America. I do not pretend to understand sufficiently, much less to write from the perspective of Christians in other contexts. Nevertheless, having spent some time living in Europe and ministering in Africa, South America, and Asia,

I can say that whenever the United States has a fever, the rest of the world begins to cough. Along with the gospel, homegrown American aberrations (like the prosperity gospel) are spreading like wildfire in the two-thirds world.

I write out of a concern to see us recover clarity in our message, focus in our mission, and commitment to the specific strategies laid out by our Lord. While *Christless Christianity* and *The Gospel-Driven Life* focused on the central *message*, this book explores the central *mission* in an age of “mission creep”—that is, a tendency to expand the church’s calling beyond its original mandate.

I believe that in our passion for relevance, we are subordinating the strategies that Christ promised to bless to our own action plans. Just as it’s easy to take the gospel for granted and to turn it into a story about us and our efforts rather than Christ and his saving work, a similar temptation is always present with respect to the Great Commission. Today this mission creep takes many forms, but as in earlier periods the tendency is usually to expand the Great Commission to include a host of enterprises that Christ did not mandate. Many of these operations throughout our history have been well motivated, and some have even been successful in their positive cultural impact. Others have led to bloody wounds and indelible scars, not only on the face of civilization but on the visible church. Yet the deeper question is whether we are losing our focus on the mission that Christ gave us for this “intermission,” the time between his two comings.

The empire to which we are sent is no longer the Roman Empire or Christendom but the powers and principalities of modernity, which are often hailed as “postmodern.” Whether we call it modern, postmodern, or most-modern, this culture is forged largely as a culture of rebellion against orthodox Christian faith and practice in the name of progress and emancipation. Sometimes this rebellion has taken an explicitly anti-Christian form, but more often it has been motivated by a concern to adapt Christian faith and practice to the norms of modern Western culture. In fact, from the Enlightenment to the “emerging church” (or “emergent”) movement, the West has experienced successive calls to “a new kind of Christianity” even in the name of mission. The appeals are often urgent: Christianity must either wither or adapt to the new conditions.

In spite of the apparent success of evangelical movements and megachurches, the United States seems increasingly unevangelized. While the West stews in the juices of growing secularization, the cen-

ter of gravity for growing Christianity has shifted from the northern hemisphere to the global south: Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Citizens of Pakistan may be more likely to encounter Korean than American missionaries today. Churches in China are now becoming sending centers for missionaries throughout the world.

The students in my seminary classes who come from Nigeria are often more serious about their faith and practice in the face of their native paganism than I am in the face of mine. They are evangelistic and they don't just make *converts*; they make *disciples*. Like the ancient Christians, they baptize adult converts and their children only after a lengthy period of instruction (catechesis), prayer, and wrestling with the spiritual forces that refuse to surrender to Christ without a fight. They know firsthand what it means to forsake father and mother and even be persecuted by members of their own household. Upon his conversion to Christ, one friend, a former Sharia lawyer who had witnessed and approved the execution of Christians, was given one day to leave his Islamic country or face beheading. His family disowned him and stayed behind.

In many ways our era is more similar to the first-century context than it is to any period since the Constantinian fusion of Christ and culture in "Christendom." On one hand, the gospel is spreading in many places around the world, despite the imminent threat of persecution and martyrdom. On the other hand, like a lot of Christians in the first-century Roman Empire, most believers in Europe and North America face disapproval, distraction, and disbelief more than martyrdom. We are threatened more by a broad cultural sentiment against strong truth claims that might upset the vague spirituality that holds the empire together than by secret police.

When the Visigoths sacked Rome in 410, the church realized how many nominal Christians were in the empire. In fact, many Romans turned back to paganism, blaming the catastrophe on the abandonment of the gods in favor of Christ. Much like the conditions that provoked Augustine to write *The City of God*, our context affords a marvelous opportunity to recover the sharp distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this present age. While Jerome lamented, "What will become of the church now that Rome has fallen?" the bishop of Hippo realized that God had brought the mission field to the missionaries.

Like George W. Bush, Barack Obama invokes the time-honored rhetoric of America as a redeemer-nation, "the last best hope for the

world,” along with the post-9/11 language of religious pluralism: that we all—at least the “Abrahamic faith traditions”—pray to the same God and share the same hope for a better world, so let’s make that the tie that binds and reject any stronger cords that would threaten the greatness of America’s mission in history. We hear this from all quarters of culture, both high and low, and we even hear it increasingly from some Christian leaders.

In this context, we feel a lot of pressure to sand down the rough edges of our message, toning down both the seriousness of God’s judgment and the wonder of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. To some extent, this is understandable. Over the last several generations, many churches have given the impression that *God’s judgment*—which leaves nobody standing—is actually *our own judgmentalism* and the gospel is “Pull yourself together!” rather than the Good News concerning Christ’s redeeming work. Our neighbors are often turned off by the most visible representatives of Christianity. Many who inveigh against the departure from “Judeo-Christian values” are exposed for their own immoral lifestyles, and statistics tell us that evangelical Christians do not live much differently from non-Christians.

So why not just bloom where you’re planted? Especially when our neighbors have seen so much hypocrisy, why not tone down the rhetoric and just live as Christ’s disciples among them? Let’s not talk about God’s wrath and judgment, repentance, and faith in Christ, but instead let’s show them that following Jesus makes a real difference in our lives here and now. You don’t have to actually profess faith in Christ publicly. Baptism and church membership are optional extras. This is no longer merely what our non-Christian neighbors tell us; it’s what a growing number of professing Christians believe—and many more seem to assume in practice.

However, the more we really understand that God’s judgment strips us of our self-righteousness and his gospel clothes us with Christ, the better prepared we are to be *more* radical in our witness and in our discipleship.

While my previous two books urge us not to take the gospel for granted, my concern in this book is for us to not take the Great Commission for granted. We have an occasional missions conference, we offer short-term missions trips for the youth, and we support missionaries to discharge the duties of the Great Commission. All of this is important. However, especially in our contemporary context, we need to become more broadly aware of the fact that we are living in

a culture and increasingly in churches that for various reasons seem distracted from the message and realities of Christ's kingdom.

There is a big difference between saying that pastors discharge an essential ministry by *making us disciples* and quite another to say that they are *vicarious disciples*, studying, praying, meditating, and witnessing in our place. We can easily assume that we have discharged our duty by paying "church workers" to be disciples for us.

Meanwhile, the various ministries of our churches here at home often focus on attracting and satisfying members with something other than the gospel and the means of grace that we expect the missionaries to take to other nations. The Great Commission and its mandated methods of proclaiming the gospel, baptizing, and teaching becomes a mandate for foreign missions, while in our own congregations we assume that everybody already gets the gospel and is well-taught in the Scriptures. A cleavage between the Great Commission and the regular life of our own churches grows into a gaping chasm. As I will argue in this book, the Great Commission is a call not only to bring the gospel to other parts of the world but also to plant and to faithfully maintain churches where disciples are made and witness expands both at home and abroad.

A lot of proselytizing and catechizing is going on today. Other religions and an increasingly secularist ideology are often aggressive in their campaigns. Not only our neighbors but we ourselves are immersed in daily news, commentaries, marketing, and conversations that presuppose a world without God, without the gospel, without Christ, and without the hope of resurrection in a new creation. There is never a good time to take the Great Commission for granted, but particularly in an age like ours.

The Outline of the Book

This book is divided into three sections. Part One focuses on "The Great Announcement." The Great Commission itself begins with the triumphant announcement that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus Christ. The gospel that brings salvation also drives the church in its mission. Tracing the thread of Christ's person and work from John the Baptist to our Lord's ascension and the sending of the Spirit, this section provides a sketch of New Testament teaching concerning the kingdom and the church that the following chapters build upon.

Part Two examines “The Mission Statement” that lies at the heart of the Great Commission, while Part Three investigates “The Strategic Plan” that Jesus includes in his mandate. What does it mean to “go into all the world and make disciples of all nations,” preaching, baptizing, and teaching everything Christ commanded (see Matt. 28:19–20)? What does it mean especially when many Christians today believe that being a disciple doesn’t necessarily mean belonging to a church—or even, in the view of a growing number, that personal faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation? How does the gospel itself encourage plurality without falling into the relativism of religious pluralism? What is the relationship between “the gospel” and particular cultures in “all the world”? And what does gospel-centered and mission-driven church life look like in practical terms on the ground? Along the way, I interact with contemporary trends in discipleship.

As this exploration opens with the Good News that grounds the church’s mission, it ends with Jesus’s promise to be with his church until the end of the age. The imperative to go into all the world and make disciples is supported by the two bookends of Christ’s gracious promise. But what does it mean for Christ to be present among us, drawing sinners to himself, when he is absent from us in the flesh since his ascension? The final chapter examines the difference that it makes for our mission here and now when we realize that Christ is building his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

I write this book as a pastor: that is, as a missionary who wants to assist fellow believers in that amazing work of preparing the whole body for its mission in the world. As I have been working on this book, my own understanding of and amazement at the Great Commission has grown. The issues that face us are critical. The paths we choose to take at this point are of enormous long-term importance. My prayer is that readers will come away, as I have, with a fresh appreciation for the message, mandate, and methods that Christ has ordained for his continuing mission in the world.

The Great Announcement

All authority in heaven and on earth has
been given to me.

Matthew 28:18

The Great Commission actually begins with a great announcement. Before there can be a mission, there has to be a message. Behind the sending of the church lies the Father's sending of his Son and Spirit. Before we go, we must stop and hear—really hear—what has happened that we are to take to the world. The evangel comes before evangelism. We must hear this gospel not just at first, for our own conversion, but every moment of our lives if the Great Commission is to be a joyful delight rather than an intolerable burden with an impossible goal. Hear it again, with all of the supporting evidence of Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Matt. 28:18).

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Before You Go

I am a pretty impulsive person. If there is a check I need to take to the bank, I rush out the door, jump in the car, and am halfway to my destination when I realize that I've forgotten the check. The most humiliating part of it is that I will have to return home and face my wife greeting me at the door, grinning, holding the check and saying, "Did you forget something?"

Just go. Just do it. "Get 'er done," as they say. Reflection slows you down.

The same thing can happen with the Great Commission. We think it doesn't really matter if we don't get all the details right, as long as we are zealous. It is easy to subordinate the message to the mission, the evangel to evangelism, as if being busy with outreach could trump the content of what we have been given to communicate.

Of course, it can work the other way too. We can be preoccupied with getting the message *right* without actually getting it *out*. The evangelist D. L. Moody once quipped to a critic of his methods, "I like my way of doing it better than your way of *not* doing it." If "zeal without knowledge" is deadly (see Rom. 10:2–3), then knowledge without zeal is dead. The Great Commission doesn't give any quarter to either of these extremes.

"Go therefore into all the world and make disciples." This is the version of the Great Commission that many of us memorized. However, it

leaves out a great deal. To begin with, it leaves out the whole rationale for the Commission in the first place. Although it sounds a little corny, a good rule of thumb in reading the Scriptures is that whenever you find a “Therefore,” you need to stop and ask “what it’s there for.”

When we see an imperative like “Go therefore,” we need to go back and look at what has already been said leading up to it. There is no reason for *us* to go into all the world as Christ’s ambassadors apart from the work that *he* has *already* accomplished.

The Great Commission actually begins with the declaration: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18). This is the rationale for everything that the church is called to do and to be. The church’s commission is indeed *directed* by a *purpose* (“making disciples of all nations”), but it is *driven* by a *promise*.

Grounding Purposes in Promises

Like our own lives, the church is gospel-driven. Every new-covenant command is grounded in the gospel. We love God because he first loved us (1 John 4:10, 19). We choose Christ because he chose us (John 15:16; Eph. 1:4–5, 11; 2 Thess. 2:13). We are called to holiness because we are already declared to be holy in Christ, clothed in his righteousness (Col. 1:22; 3:12; 1 Cor. 1:30). Because we have been crucified, buried, and raised with Christ, we are no longer under the tyranny of sin and are therefore to offer up ourselves in body and soul to righteousness (Rom. 6:1–14). In view of “the mercies of God,” we are called to “present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom. 12:1).

Similarly, in our corporate calling as the church, we are always responding to a state of affairs that God has spoken into being rather than creating that reality ourselves. The church’s mission is grounded in God’s mission, which he fulfilled objectively in his Son and whose subjective effects he is bringing about in the world through his Spirit. Because the Father sent the Son and then the Spirit, we are sent into all the world with his gospel. So being *mission*-driven is really the same as being *gospel*-driven. As believers and as churches, we are motivated by the mission of the Triune God, as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit save us and send us with that saving message to our neighbors.

All of our spiritual blessings are found in Christ, not in our individual or collective decisions, experiences, efforts, or ambitions. We confess our faith in “one holy, catholic and apostolic church” not because we can see

it nor because of any vain confidence that we can build it. Our unity is based on the fact that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:5). Despite all appearances to the contrary, we believe that this church is catholic, because it is not a communion of friends I chose for myself but a family that God has chosen from all of eternity in his Son. We believe that this church is also holy, not because of its empirical piety but because God has made Jesus Christ our wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). And finally, the church is apostolic not because we can identify living apostles in the world today but because it proclaims the apostolic doctrine in the power of the Spirit.

Far from eliminating our own responsibility, this Good News concerning God’s work in Christ is what liberates and propels the church out into the world. Only because it is in Christ is there an assembly of sinners drawn from every people and language that has been transferred from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of everlasting life.

The Original Missionary

Many of us grew up with missions conferences where a handful of Great Commission verses were repeated in order to justify the missionary imperative. Sometimes we got the impression that God has done his part (providing the opportunity for salvation) and now the rest is up to us. *We* become the main subjects of the Great Commission.

However, as Christopher J. H. Wright has pointed out in his remarkable book *The Mission of God*, the whole Bible is about *God’s* mission, with Christ as the central character.¹ In his postresurrection appearances to the disciples, Jesus not only preached himself as the center of Scripture (Luke 24:27, 44), but he made their proclamation of him part of that mission as well: “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47 NIV).

So it’s not only that there are a few major verses justifying missions. Rather, the whole Bible is about God’s mission: sending his Son, then sending his Spirit, and sending his people out as his disciples. In fact, as Wright points out, the Bible itself is a missional document, arising out of and keeping up with the history of God’s missional activity in the world. The messianic center of Scripture is inseparable from its missional context and thrust.²

And this missionary God is not one person but three. Every person of the Trinity is involved in every work—creation, providence, redemption, consummation—yet each in his own way. The Father begets, the Son is eternally begotten, and the Spirit is breathed out by the Father in the Son. Every work of the Godhead is done from the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit. The Father is the origin, the Son is the mediator, and the Spirit is the perfecting agent who ensures that the Word will not return empty-handed from its mission. From eternity, then, God’s missions have always been based on an essential unity with a plurality of persons-in-relationship. The character of that relationship is covenantal, with mutual giving and receiving: no debts, just an everlasting exchange of gifts.

We are God’s analogy, created in his image to reflect in our own creaturely manner that covenantal relationship of male and female in a mission. Just as God completed all of his work and then entered his Sabbath enthronement, Adam—with Eve at his side—was to lead creation in triumphant procession into the consummation: everlasting confirmation in immortal glory. Long after the original treason of this royal couple in Paradise, the Last Adam appeared. Jesus Christ is both the missionary God and the human representative who fulfilled the mission for which we were created. The whole story of the Bible turns on the merciful determination of this Triune God to redeem and to restore sinful creatures and the creation that lies in bondage because of the curse. In spite of every failure, disloyalty, and unfaithfulness of the human partner in the covenant, God will complete his mission. And in the person of Christ, he has also fulfilled the mission that he assigned to humankind in Adam: to lead creation into the everlasting blessing of immortality, forgiveness, righteousness, and peace.

Calling Abram out of a moon-worshipping family, God kept the promise alive even after the fall. Like Jesus’s disciples, Abram went to a place about which he knew almost nothing, simply on the basis of God’s word. God promised Abram that he would be not only an earthly father of Isaac and his descendants in an earthly land but also a spiritual father of heirs from every nation who would be blessed through his seed. In spite of his people’s covenant-breaking, the missionary God kept calling and sending prophets not only to indict Israel on the basis of its violation of the covenant made at Sinai but to renew God’s pledge to the Abrahamic promise through a new covenant. God himself would descend in judgment and redemption. The God of Israel would complete the mission that Israel, like Adam, failed to fulfill.

The Gospel-Driven Church

The church in the new covenant is no less “prone to wander” than the church in the old covenant. And it is therefore no less dependent entirely on the faithfulness of the Father, in the Son, by his Spirit. The promise of the Savior has always created, sustained, and expanded the kingdom of God. When Israel violated the covenant of law that they swore at Sinai, the prophets nevertheless proclaimed God’s faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant. This divine oath would be realized in the new covenant, when God would forgive their sins and give them a new heart (Jer. 31).

We must never take Christ’s work for granted. The gospel is not merely something we take to unbelievers; it is the Word that created and continues to sustain the whole church in its earthly pilgrimage. In addition, we must never confuse Christ’s work with our own. There is a lot of loose talk these days about our “living the gospel” or even “being the gospel,” as if our lives were the Good News. We even hear it said that the church is an extension of Christ’s incarnation and redeeming work, as if Jesus came to provide the moral example or template and we are called to complete his work. But there is one Savior and one head of the church. To him alone all authority is given in heaven and on earth. There is only one incarnation of God in history, and he finished the work of fulfilling all righteousness, bearing the curse, and triumphing over sin and death.

We use the verb “redeem” too casually today, as if we (individually or collectively) could be the agent of this sort of action. God has already redeemed the world in his Son, having “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). On this basis, the Spirit is at work applying this redemption, drawing sinners to Christ, justifying and renewing them, in the hope that their bodies will be raised together with an entirely renovated creation (Rom. 8:16–23). The church comes into being not as an extension or further completion of Christ’s redeeming work but as a result of his completed work. Heralds *announce* victory; they don’t *achieve* it.

Jesus Christ has been given all authority in heaven and on earth to judge and to save. This great announcement that launches the Great Commission is anticipated throughout the Gospel of John.

Although the Word was made flesh, his own did not receive him. “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John

1:12–13). We do not have the ability or authority to make ourselves children of God, but Jesus exercises his authority to give life in the power of the Spirit. Jesus told Nicodemus that apart from this new birth from above, no one can enter his kingdom (John 3:5).

In John 5, Jesus said, “For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (v. 21). The Father has given all judgment into the hands of the Son (vv. 22–23). Then in chapter 6 Jesus says,

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. . . . No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. (vv. 37–39, 44)

In chapter 10, Jesus says,

I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. (vv. 14–15, 27–28)

Again in chapter 15 he reminded his disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide” (v. 16). Then, on the verge of Good Friday, Jesus prayed,

Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. . . . I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. (John 17:1–3, 9)

So there is a thread running throughout John’s Gospel that testifies to the eternal covenant of redemption between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father chose a people in Christ from the mass of fallen humanity, giving them to Christ as their mediator,

with the Spirit as the one who will give them faith and keep them in that faith to the end. Not one of those whom the Father gave to the Son will be lost.

Given the unity of the Bible's witness to Christ, this thread of passages in John's Gospel helps us to understand what Jesus meant in the Great Commission. Although this commission is not repeated in the same form in Luke or in John, the basic substance is found in their concluding chapters as well (Luke 24:44–53; John 21:15–19). "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt. 28:18). What an announcement! It presupposes everything from our Lord's conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary to his ascension to the Father's right hand. And it anticipates his return in glory to judge the living and the dead. He alone has all authority to judge and to save.

In his opening vision in the Apocalypse, John hears these words from the glorified Son: "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:17–18). It is this triumphant indicative that grounds Jesus's command to John: "*write therefore* the things you have seen" in this remarkable book (v. 19, emphasis added). In the same way, his announcement that all authority is in his hands is the rationale for the Great Commission's "*Go therefore . . .*"!

Given the fact that we—and those to whom we are sent—are "dead in the trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), we do not have the authority or power to save ourselves or even to respond in faith apart from God's gracious liberation (Eph. 2:5, 8–9). The Great Commission would be a futile task if the ultimate power and authority lay in our hands or in the hands of those to whom we bring the gospel. Jesus Christ did not make it possible for us to be saved. He did not begin a work of redemption. He did not do "his part" so that we could do ours. Rather, Jesus Christ has accomplished everything. He has assumed our flesh. He has fulfilled all righteousness in our place and has borne the judgment for every one of our sins as our substitute. And he has been raised as the firstfruits of a whole harvest, the beginning of the resurrection from the dead. There is no more redeeming work to be done!

I'll never forget when this marvelous truth of Christ's objective, completed work really gripped me. My well-meaning pastor once asked me, "When were you saved?" Without intending to be clever, I heard myself answer, "Two thousand years ago." At first, I was as surprised at the remark as my pastor. A lot of our talk about "getting saved" in evangelical circles focuses on the day that we did something:

we invited Jesus into our heart, said a prayer, went forward, or otherwise evidenced a decisive conversion experience. However, this shifts the concentration from the gospel itself (Christ's saving work) to our experience of the gospel. We are commanded to believe the gospel, but the gospel itself is an announcement concerning Christ's all-sufficient achievement for us.

Not even the new birth is the result of human decision or effort. We are not given steps for "How to Be Born Again." Jesus's statement in John 3, that one must be born from above in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, is not an *imperative* (i.e., command) but an *indicative* (i.e., statement of fact). That is, it simply declares the state of affairs. We are not born again by our decision, as John had already indicated in chapter 1 (v. 13). Rather, says Peter, "you have been born again . . . through the living and abiding word of God. . . . And this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23, 25). The gospel is *for* us, not *about* us. It isn't about anything that we do, feel, or choose. It is the Good News about Jesus Christ and what he has accomplished for us.

Of course, the new birth evidences itself in conversion: a lifelong response of repentance and faith. God does not believe for us, but we do so because we have been redeemed already by Christ and are given the gift of faith. All of our salvation is found in union with Christ. It takes a miracle to believe in Christ—and he is still a wonder-working Savior whose miracle of the new birth is greater than all of the signs he performed in his earthly ministry.

Because all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Jesus Christ, we are sent into the world with confidence that God's mission will be accomplished. Paul preached the gospel to Lydia and "the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). After explaining that God "saved us, . . . not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Tim. 1:9), Paul—on the verge of his execution in Rome—assured Timothy, "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10).

The greatest missionary in the history of the church was driven by the gospel indicatives. Because God had chosen sinners from a mass of spiritual death, Christ had saved them, and the Spirit gives them faith through the preaching of the gospel, Paul could go on, enduring persecution, knowing that God's purposes would be realized. Neither

Caesar, nor the Jewish leaders, nor the sinners to whom he preached possessed this authority. With the other apostles, Paul was entrusted with the keys of the kingdom—that is, the gospel itself. However, not even he could open the sealed tomb of the fallen heart. The preaching of the gospel seems weak and foolish in the eyes of the world. “But I am not ashamed,” he tells Timothy, “for I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Tim. 1:12).

A missionary friend once said that when his plane approached the Mumbai airport and he saw the masses of people below, he was overwhelmed with the impossibility of his task. Then he remembered that he was not commissioned to save these people, or even to open their hearts to believe the gospel, but simply to proclaim it, and God would gather his people. That made all the difference, he said, and he was liberated to fulfill his calling. There can be no recovery of delight in the Great Commission without a renewal of the church’s conviction that it not only came into being but is sustained in every moment by the will and work of the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. It is this confidence that motivates a missionary in Saudi Arabia to labor for years before witnessing a single conversion. So why do so many of us, as American Christians, measure success in our own churches by other standards, based on what we can accomplish and see on an impressive scale?

Christ’s ascension to the right hand of the Father creates the confidence that our going will not be in vain, whether we are sent to China or to our next-door neighbor. The same Word that creates and sustains the church’s own existence and growth is proclaimed to the world so that Christ’s kingdom expands to the ends of the earth. The Father’s decision is irrevocable. Christ’s mission is accomplished already, and the Spirit will be just as successful in his labors. Therefore, the Great Commission cannot fail.

Jesus had already prepared the disciples for his departure and the sending of the Spirit (John 14–16). He had told them, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 16:18–19). Christ himself has redeemed his church and is now building his church in the power of his Word and Spirit. It is not a kingdom that we are *building* but a kingdom that we are *receiving* (Heb. 12:28).

In Heaven and on Earth

The titles “Lord” and “Savior of the world” are familiar in our Christian vocabulary. Apart from the unfolding drama of redemption, they are mere slogans. In fact, these phrases have taken on a less radical meaning in our ordinary usage today. We often speak of “making Jesus our personal Lord and Savior,” but this obscures two important points.

First, we do not *make* Jesus *anything*, especially Lord and Savior. It is because he already is Lord and Savior that we are freed from the fear of death and hell. *All authority* belongs to him already.

Second, the gospel announces Jesus Christ not only as your personal Lord and Savior or mine, but as *the* Lord and Savior of the world. All authority *in heaven and on earth* belongs to him. As the risen Lord, he is given by the Father the power to judge and to justify. Salvation is not just “fire insurance” or “sin management.” The gospel promises far more than going to heaven when you die. It is an all-encompassing pledge from God for the total renewal of creation. It involves the resurrection of our bodies and the liberation of the whole creation from its bondage to sin and death. What insurance plan, global market, or government agency can claim this kind of authority over life and death? When he returns, Jesus will judge every person and nation and consummate his kingdom in everlasting righteousness and peace. We cannot limit salvation to our private world of the soul; the whole cosmos was created by the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit, and it is upheld and finally redeemed in the same way.

The privatized view of Jesus merely as “personal Lord and Savior” does not really provoke controversy today. After all, our non-Christian neighbors shrug, “Whatever works for you.” However, these ascriptions of praise to Jesus Christ were subversive on the lips of early Christians in the Roman Empire. After all, they were titles that Caesar had ascribed to himself. People could believe whatever they wanted to in private. Whatever they found morally useful, therapeutically valuable, or spiritually and intellectually enlightening was fine. In fact, when it came to gods, the more the merrier! The Roman Empire was a melting pot of cultures and religions. However, whatever varied religions and spiritualities it tolerated, Rome insisted that they contribute to the civil religion that included the cult of the emperor. God could have his heaven, or the inner soul, but Caesar was “lord of the earth.”

The early Christians were not fed to wild beasts or dipped in wax and set ablaze as lamps in Nero’s garden because they thought Jesus

was a helpful life coach or role model but because they witnessed to him as the only Lord and Savior of the world. Jesus Christ doesn't just live in the private hearts of individuals as the source of an inner peace. He is the Creator, Ruler, Redeemer, and Judge of all the earth. And now he commands everyone everywhere to repent. All idols are shams. All power and authority not only in heaven but on earth is Christ's. He has cast Satan out of the heavenly sanctuary, where he prosecuted the saints day and night (Rev. 12). And now, having bound the strong man, he is looting his house on earth, taking back what rightfully belongs to him (Matt. 12:29).

We can only imagine the offense that such testimony as the following might have aroused in Caesar or his emissaries:

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of the cross. (Col. 1:16–20)

Later in Colossians Paul writes,

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col. 2:13–15)

The “rulers and authorities”—whether sin, death, and Satan themselves or their earthly lackeys who spread destruction to the ends of the earth—are already divested of their ultimate power. Like the deceiver himself, they fall over themselves in a stupor of pride, oppression, and persecution of the church, but they will all be brought down; their time is short (Rev. 18). Even in his “weakness,” God has made a mockery of the powerful of this age (1 Cor. 1:25–29).

Caesars may still rule and demand the proper temporal allegiance of their subjects (Rom. 13:1–7), but they rule at the pleasure of the

Sovereign of the universe. Disease may stalk and death may claim our bodies, but it no longer has the last word: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Our fate does not lie in the impersonal forces of nature. We are not at the mercy of insurance companies and health care providers. Not the invisible hand of the market but Jesus Christ is Lord of all powers and principalities.

Of course, devout Jews agreed that there was only one universal sovereign, Yahweh, and stoutly refused any collusion with Gentile idolatry. However, they just as sharply rejected the apostles’ transfer of the name of Yahweh in the prophets (Joel 2:32) to Jesus (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13). They regarded as blasphemy such statements as we find in Acts 4:12: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

The boundaries of Israel are now redrawn around Jesus Christ. There is a new kingdom, from heaven, spreading its dominion in this world. It is not a kingdom of power and glory, with an earthly capital. It is a kingdom of grace and forgiveness, overcoming the death and condemnation under which the world lies helpless.

Are you rattled by the magnitude of opposition to the gospel, increasingly even in the nations once nominally committed to a vaguely Christian culture? Does the Great Commission seem threatened by the gathering forces of secularism, militant Islam, consumerism, violence, and moral relativism? These are among the “principalities and powers” that Christ has vanquished objectively, although their effects have not yet been finally and forever eliminated.

New Testament scholar Oscar Cullmann compared Christ’s resurrection and return in glory to “D-day” and “V-day” during World War II. The landing assault broke the back of the Nazi forces, but insurgent battles raged until victory in Europe was fully realized. Even now, Christ has crushed the head of the serpent and is setting prisoners free. All authority in heaven and on earth is given to him. Are you distressed by your lack of understanding, zeal, or faithfulness in your own discipleship, much less in your appreciation for the Great Commission? Christ is Lord! He has forgiven you all of your sins and has given you a new heart. In spite of every setback, you are assured that your Shepherd-King has already won the war!