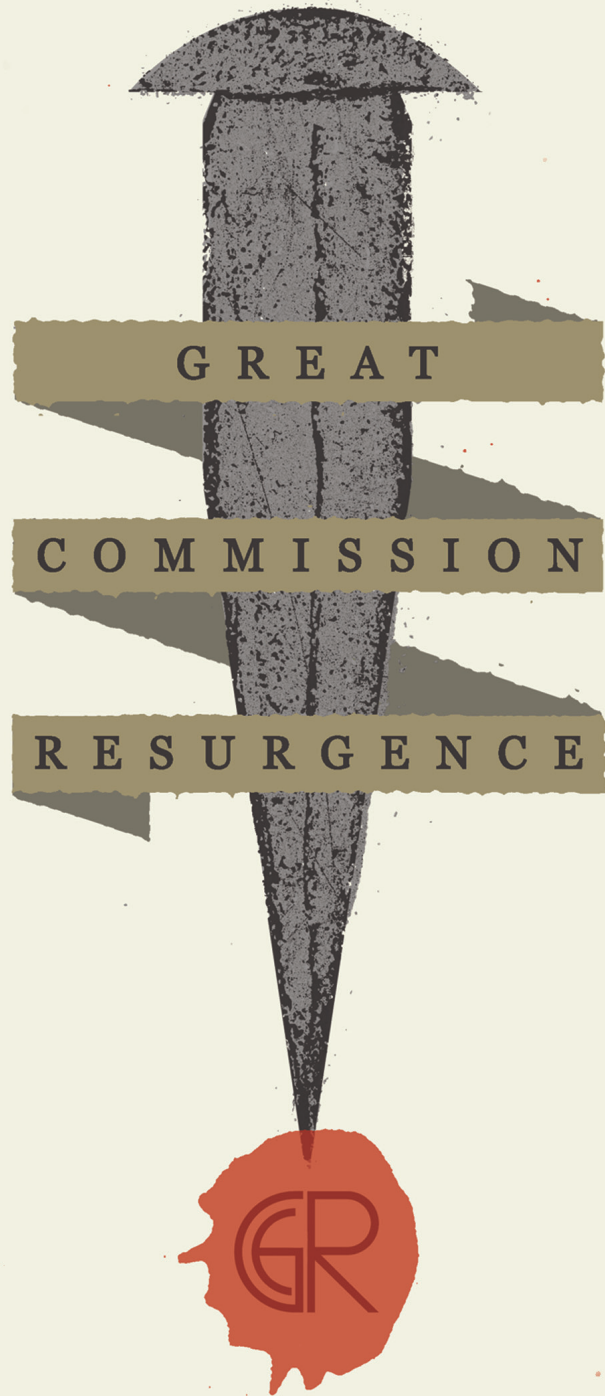


BECOMING A GREAT COMMISSION CHURCH

By Chuck Lawless



Even with the phenomenal opportunities we have to spread the Gospel today, much of the world still waits for a Gospel witness. The numbers, in fact, reveal the need.

Of 11,000+ people groups, more than 6,600 remain unreached. More than 2,000 of these groups have a population of over 100,000 people. Of these 2,000 groups, slightly over 500 are still unengaged.¹ In addition, over 350 million people have no portion of the Scripture available in their language.²

The numbers in North America are no less ominous. Of the 340 million people in North America, at least 75 percent are assumed to be non-believers.³ More than 80 percent of the churches on this continent are plateaued or declining. Despite having more than 350,000 churches, the United States is now one of the top four lost nations in the world.

What churches will choose to make a dent in this global darkness? My combined roles as dean of the Billy Graham School of Missions and Evangelism at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and theological education consultant for the International Mission Board of the SBC have allowed me to see global outreach up close. I have served on the field short-term alongside deeply committed missionaries. I have worked with pastors who genuinely desire to make an eternal difference. Through these opportunities, I have seen even more clearly how central the local church is for the work of the Great Commission. The purpose of this little booklet is to give you simple guidelines for leading your congregation to be a Great Commission church.

Getting started: pray

The famous English pastor Charles Spurgeon once wrote words that still demand our attention today: “Do not restrain prayer. . . . For only through prayer can the prosperity

of a church be increased or even maintained.”⁴ We know that Great Commission growth does not occur without God’s blessing, yet how easy it is to talk about the Great Commission while missing this most significant component of prayer!

Elsewhere I have written extensively about developing a prayer ministry in the local church.⁵ My goal in this section is simply to describe the most basic prayer ministry principle described more completely in these other works: church leaders — primarily the pastor — must set the example in leading a church to pray to become a Great Commission church.

Listen to these words from the pastor of a growing church in Texas:

“For thirty years I preached more about prayer than I prayed. But it wasn’t until people started seeing praying in my life that my words made a difference. We are fighting on the wrong battlefield. The battle is to be won on our knees. Then we go out and do what God tells us to do. *There is no substitute for praying preachers.*”⁶ (emphasis added)

Most church leaders want a ready-made program for prayer, but almost every prayer study indicates that a praying church begins with a praying pastor. If you are a church leader, take a moment to answer this question honestly: “If all of our church members prayed as much and as fervently as I do, should I expect our church to be a Great Commission church?” If your answer is “no,” you know where to begin.

Here are a few steps toward becoming a praying church leader:

1. Hold yourself accountable to someone. Find someone who knows you well, and who cares enough about you to confront you with this question: “Have you prayed today?” The age of email makes it possible for someone to ask us this question every day, and most of us need *daily* accountability for our praying.
2. Pray with your spouse and family every day. Even a few minutes a day is a starting point, especially if you have small children. You will more emphasize prayer and more forcefully challenge your church to pray

if you know that prayer in your own home is consistent.

3. Do Bible studies on great prayer warriors. It is difficult to read the stories of prayer in the early church without longing to pray as they did. More specifically, it is hard *not* to pray more when we read how much Jesus prayed (for example, in the book of Luke). Learn about prayer warriors, and you will likely pray more.
4. Be comfortable with small daily improvements. Few persons become prayer warriors overnight. If today you pray 10 minutes longer than yesterday, thank God for that improvement. If tomorrow’s prayer is simply more focused than today’s, be grateful for the progress. Daily growth eventually means long-term growth.
5. Beginning today, select a Great Commission prayer team for your church. You get the point — nothing will change unless you begin by praying today. The mission of the Great Commission is so overwhelming that prayer is essential. Select a group of at least three prayer warriors, and lead them to pray that your church would effectively engage the Great Commission:

- Pray for boldness among the church’s witnesses (Eph. 6:19-20).
- Pray for open doors to speak the Gospel clearly (Col. 4:2-6).
- Pray for people to get saved (Rom. 10:1).
- Pray that God will continue to provide needed laborers (Matt. 9:35-38).
- Express thanksgiving for God’s work (1 Thess. 5:18).

Setting goals: personally evangelize

I teach evangelism, but evangelism does not always come easy to me. That is surprising to me now, as sharing my faith was quite easy when I was a young believer. In fact, evangelism was never difficult until I became a pastor — when the multiple tasks of ministry seemed to get in the way of evangelism. The more involved I was in leading my church, the less involved I seemed to be in evangelism.

I have since realized that I must



intentionally plan evangelism into my life. I have also learned that I am not the only pastor who has to work to keep evangelism at the forefront of his ministry. For me, doing so includes setting personal goals about evangelism.

I am well aware that setting goals for evangelism makes some people nervous. Some will fear that I am suggesting manipulating others into a “decision” for Christ simply to increase numbers. Others may be concerned that I am reducing non-believers to a project to be completed. Some will think that my approach is too man-centered.

None of these concerns are legitimate, in my opinion. I know that God alone saves, and I agree that we must be careful not to manipulate others into a false sense of spiritual security. I also realize that setting goals can lead to impersonal evangelism and a man-centered focus, but I am not convinced that establishing goals automatically leads there.

What I am suggesting is that we must so love God, so believe the Gospel, and so grieve over a lost world that we do what it takes to be obedient to the Great Commission. Perhaps the method I am suggesting here will prove helpful to other pastors, particularly as the North American Mission Board calls us to emphasize God’s Plan for Sharing (GPS).⁷

1. Set a goal for developing relationships with non-believers. In most cases, we get so isolated in our Christian bubble that we seldom have strong friendships with non-believers. Countering this tendency is not easy unless we intentionally strive to develop relationships with people outside of the church. Consider setting a goal to be in a growing relationship with at least three non-believers at any time — while always watching for opportunities to share the Gospel.
2. Set a goal for praying for non-believers. Pray for the three relationships mentioned above, and then pray for at least two more non-believers. Determine to pray at least weekly that God will open their blinded minds (2 Cor. 4:3-4) and transfer them from the dominion of dark-

ness to the kingdom of His Son (Col. 1:13). Pray as well that you will share the Gospel boldly and clearly when an open door is apparent (Eph. 6:18-20; Col. 4:3-4).

3. Set a goal for simply speaking about God’s goodness. Many of us are out of the habit of speaking about God to *anyone* unless the other person raises the subject. One way to move toward sharing the Gospel is to start by speaking of God’s goodness to someone each day. Speak about God to your spouse, a staff member, the convenience store clerk, the bank teller. Tell *somebody* about God’s work in your life each day, and sharing the Gospel may well become easier.
4. Set a goal for sharing the Gospel. As you develop relationships, pray for others and begin to speak about God, trust Him to empower you to speak the Gospel to someone. If you are not evangelizing now, consider a goal to share Christ at least twice a month. If you are already doing evangelism, ask God to move you toward sharing Christ at least weekly, if not daily. Establish the goal, and then get started!
5. Set a goal for mentoring new believers. The Great Commission is not complete when evangelism has occurred. If you are not mentoring young believers, you are missing a critical component of the discipling process. Take the initiative — set a goal to mentor one or two believers, and go enlist them. Do not wait for them to come to you.

My prayer is that all Southern Baptists will so walk with God that evangelism is a natural outflow of our lives. We are a long way from there, however. We are weak disciplers, and our statistics make us painfully aware that we are doing far too little evangelism. All of our evangelism programs will be ineffective unless individual Southern Baptists reaffirm our commitment to the Great Commission. If setting personal evangelism goals moves us in that direction, I pray that our recommitment will begin there.



Touching the world: promote and do missions

For some amazing reason, God has graciously chosen to use His church to reach the world. Through the preaching of the Word and the witness of His people, God is drawing to Himself a people from around the world (Rev. 5:8-10). The fact that we are permitted to share in this great work is astounding to me.

Too often, though, we leave missions to the “professional” missionaries who are serving “somewhere over there.” How regrettable (and disobedient) this is, especially when communication and transportation are so advanced today. Consider these simple ways to increase your church’s commitment to global outreach:

1. Ask God to give you a heart for the world. I have seen entire churches grow burdened about the Great Commission after God moved first in the life of only one church member. Ask God to move in your heart in that way. Read about the world; learn about needs; weep over loss. Passionate, mission-minded church members are difficult to ignore!

2. Teach the next generation about missions. I fear that many of our churches have so neglected missions training for our next generations that our children no longer have missionary heroes. If Lottie Moon is only a name and the needs of the world are known only through cable news, few of our children will ever grieve for 1.7 billion people who have little access to the Gospel. Who of the next generation will take the Gospel into the darkness if our children know nothing about missions? Decide now to start or strengthen your church's missions training for children and youth.
3. Promote, promote, and promote again any missions offering that your church supports. Out of the wealth God has given us, we are privileged to help sustain global outreach. I am convinced that, even in a time of economic crunch, God's people will give if they believe in the cause — and if their leaders challenge them. On the other hand, leaders who assume that members will not give should expect little in return. Teach your members about the needs of the world, and introduce them to the sacrificial work of missionaries around the world. *Show them that their giving matters*, and challenge them to give until the sacrifice is real.
4. Invite stateside missionaries to speak to your church. Here is a truth that church leaders must understand: it is *not* the responsibility of missionaries alone to seek places to speak. They do desire prayer partners, and they do want to tell their stories — but the process of recruiting speakers should begin with church leaders who want their congregations to do the Great Commission. Nothing speaks to churches quite like a “real live” missionary does, and the time set aside for a missionary speaker is time well spent. Contact your state convention or one of our Southern

Baptist mission agencies to find the names of missionaries available to come to your church.

5. Challenge church members to pray daily for missionaries. I suspect that Southern Baptists talk about praying for missionaries more than we actually pray for them. Church leader, be a real leader here — set the example by praying at least weekly for North American and international missionaries. Provide for your congregation a list of missionary names and needs, being careful to protect those who serve in sensitive areas. Set aside time in the worship service to pray specifically for missionaries and unreached people groups. Great Commission praying should be such a part of the DNA of your church that you make it difficult for members not to pray for missionaries.
6. Sponsor short-term mission trips for your church members. Teaching about missions is a starting point, but actually experiencing missions can be life-changing. Perhaps your church will become the first to send a team to an unreached people group, or maybe your members will assist in planting a church in a North American urban center. Set a goal to send at least 10 percent of your church's active attenders on a mission trip this year. Be sure to work with on-the-ground missionaries who are developing strategies, and plan to assist in doing the entire Great Commission: reaching people, and then discipling the new believers.
7. Challenge your church members to be missionaries, including in their own neighborhoods. No longer is the mission field only overseas. The world has come to North America, and our neighbors sometimes speak a different language and worship a different “god.” Evangelism in North America now requires crossing cultural barriers in order to

gain a hearing and speak the Gospel. Challenge your members to be missionaries much like the early church, who “went everywhere gossiping the Gospel; they did it naturally, enthusiastically, and with the conviction of those who are not paid to say that sort of thing.”⁸ More specifically, intentionally and fervently pray for God to raise up career international missionaries from your congregation. Missionaries — both North American and abroad — should be Great Commission extensions of your local church.

Moving forward: keep learning while doing ministry

None of us is a perfect church leader, and few of us naturally default to a Great Commission passion. Instead, we often get cocooned in the midst of doing ministry — and inadvertently get diverted from the Great Commission. Continued Great Commission studies are one way to stay focused on the task, particularly if you can continue those studies while remaining in your ministry setting as much as possible. I encourage you, even if you are a layperson in a church, to consider getting further Great Commission training that will better equip you for this monumental task.⁹

Conclusion

In doing the work of the Great Commission, your church matters. My church matters. The church down the road matters. In fact, you matter. I matter. Each of your church members matters. Every local church can — and must — play a role if we intend to carry out Jesus' commands in Matthew 28:18-20.

Our task is to preach the Word to all the nations, beginning where we live and trusting His power to do the work (Luke 24:46-49). May God work through you to lead your congregation to be a Great Commission church.

¹ See <http://www.imb.org/globalresearch/>

² See <http://www.wycliffe.org/>

³ See http://www.namb.net/atf/cf/{cda250e8-8866-4236-9a0c-c646de153446}/EVANGELISM_AND_CHURCH_PLANTING_IN_NA.PDF

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *The Power of Prayer in a Believer's Life* (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1993), 105.

⁵ Charles Lawless, *Serving in Your Church Prayer Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Chuck Lawless, *Discipled Warriors* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002).

⁶ Glen Martin and Dian Ginter, *Power House* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994), 45.

⁷ See <http://www.gps2020.net/site/c.ihKOI0PAImE/b.5110311/k.BCA2/Home.htm>

⁸ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 243.

⁹ You may contact the Graham School of Southern Seminary at www.sbts.edu/bgs

