

THE GREAT DECOMMISSION



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by

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KUYPER FOUNDATION
TAUNTON • ENGLAND
2011

Published in Great Britain by
THE KUYPER FOUNDATION
P. O. BOX 2, TAUNTON, SOMERSET,
TAI 4ZD, ENGLAND

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ISBN 978-0-9522058-8-3

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Printed and bound in Great Britain

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THE GREAT DECOMMISSION

Go ye therefore, and teach [i.e. disciple] all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.
(Mt. 28:19–20)

INTRODUCTION

THE Great Commission consists of three parts: (1) the command to disciple the nations, (2) the command to baptise the nations, and (3) the command to teach the nations to obey God's law. Before looking at the implications of this Great Commission, however, there is a matter of grammar that needs to be addressed first if we are to understand properly what Christ has commissioned his Church to do.

The modern English translation of the first part of v. 19 is ambiguous. The reason for this is that English, strictly speaking, has no verb meaning *to disciple*. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Eighth Edition) lists the word *disciple* as a noun only. The nearest verb to it is *to discipline*, which, although not without relevance for what it means to be a disciple of Christ, does not convey the meaning of the Greek term used, *μαθητεύσατε* (aor. act. imp. of *μαθητεύω*). The Greek verb *μαθητεύω* means *to be a disciple*.¹ This verb is used in classical Greek only in an intransitive sense.² In the koine Greek of the New Testament, however, which was the everyday language spoken by the people of the Roman empire in

¹ G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), p. 275.

² H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Gospel of Matthew* (Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, [1883] 1978, trans. Peter Christie), p. 527.

the first century, it was used transitively to mean *to make a disciple of*,³ taking as its direct object in Mt. 28:19 “all the nations” (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη).

Because there is, strictly speaking, no single term in English that translates this Greek verb the Authorised Version, following Tyndale and the Geneva Bible, translates the first part of the Great Commission as “Go ye therefore, and *teach* all nations.” This translation preserves the grammar and the unambiguous meaning of the original Greek accurately. Most modern translations, however, have followed the translators of the Revised Version, which reads: “Go ye therefore and *make disciples of* all the nations.” Thus the New American Standard Bible reads: “Go therefore and *make disciples of* all the nations.” Likewise the Revised Standard Version reads: “Go therefore and *make disciples of* all nations.” Even the New King James Version changes the Authorised Version’s wording to “Go therefore and *make disciples of* all the nations,” failing completely to observe an important reason for keeping the Authorised Version’s “*teach* all nations.”

There are two problems with this modern translation: first, it turns the Greek verb *to disciple* (μαθητεύω) into the English verb *to make*, and the direct object of this verb becomes the English noun *disciples* instead of *nations*. Second, it turns the direct object of the Greek verb into a genitive; i.e. it turns the word “nations,” which in the Greek is in the accusative case (the case of the direct object), into a genitive case governed by the preposition “of,” which is not in the Greek. This gives us an English phrase that is ambiguous in the place of a Greek phrase that is not ambiguous. The difference between the Greek original and the various English translations of the phrase is set out in the chart on p. 9.

The modern English translation could be taken to mean just

³ K. H. Rengstorf, “μαθητεύω” in Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968, trans. G. W. Bromiley), Vol. IV, p. 461; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 1961, trans. Robert W. Funk), §148, p. 82af.

MATTHEW 28:19a—COMPARISON OF ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS WITH THE GREEK ORIGINAL

Greek	πορευθέντες nom. pl. masc. part. aor. of πορεύομαι	οὖν	μαθητεύσατε 2nd pers. pl. aor. imper. act. of μαθητεύω	πάντα τὰ ἔθνη acc. neuter pl. case of direct object
Literal	Going	therefore	disciple	all the nations
Tyndale	Go	therefore	and teach	all nations
Geneva	Go	therefore	and teach	all nations
AV	Go ye	therefore	and teach	all nations
RV	Go ye	therefore	and make disciples of	all the nations
NASB	Go	therefore	and make disciples of	all the nations
RSV	Go	therefore	and make disciples of	all nations
NKJ	Go	therefore	and make disciples of	all the nations
NIV	Therefore go		and make disciples of	all nations
JBP	You, then, are to go		and make disciples of	all the nations

what the Greek says, i.e. “make the *nations* [direct object] the disciples of Christ.” But it does not have to be understood in this way. It is ambiguous, vague. It could equally be taken to mean something else, and unfortunately in modern times, because of the pietistic theological consensus that has come to dominate the Church’s understanding of the faith, it has overwhelmingly been taken to mean something else, namely “make disciples *from among* the nations.” This is a perfectly reasonable and correct understanding of the English. But it is an incorrect rendering of the Greek. The Greek says that we are to go and disciple the *nations*, not make disciples *of* the nations, i.e. *from among* the nations. The same English phrase can mean two different things. The English language can be wonderfully vague and ambiguous, and such ambiguity is not without its uses. But it is not helpful here. It hinders our understanding of the Scripture. Many people misunderstand the Great Commission as a command to make disciples of people from all nations. This is not what Jesus commanded his disciples to do. Rather, he commanded them to disciple the nations *as* nations. i.e. to make Christian *nations*. The vagueness of the modern English translation has led to, or at least has helped to confirm in the opinion of most Christians today, an incorrect understanding of the Great Commission. This misconception has been so readily accepted because of the pietistic nature of contemporary Christian belief, i.e. the idea that the Christian faith relates to an understanding of spirituality that is narrowly focused on the individual’s private devotional life, Church worship—which is increasingly equated with singing choruses—and the “afterlife.” In this perspective the faith is not seen as having a direct bearing on the everyday issues that determine so much of our lives—for example education, politics, welfare, the economy, the arts and culture generally. The Christian faith is not seen as addressing these areas at all by the vast majority of Christians today. The faith has been privatised and as a result has been neutered of its power to transform society. In this context the misreading of the Great Commission as a command to make individual disciples from among the nations has seemed natural. But the modern context has distorted the Church’s understanding

of the Bible and the modern understanding of the Great Commission is erroneous.

This misunderstanding of the Great Commission and of the nature of the Christian faith generally has not always prevailed. In previous centuries the Church did understand the necessity of converting the nations. The concept of Christendom was the result of the Church's understanding of the Great Commission historically: i.e. the creation of Christian nations. Britain is still constitutionally a Christian nation, though it is no longer so in practice because of the triumph of secular humanism, which has been aided and abetted in its destruction of Christian culture and values in society by the widespread pietistic conception of the faith as a private devotional cult that has no role as public truth and therefore no *religious* value. Indeed it has been one of the shibboleths of modern Christian practice to claim that the Christian faith is *not* a religion.⁴ As a consequence, even within the Church of England there is much talk of disestablishment of the Church. Disestablishment would mean of course not only that Britain would be apostate, as it is now, but also no longer constitutionally Christian, and therefore not part of Christendom. Instead it would be part of the kingdom of another religion: secular humanism.

Why is the idea of Christendom so unpopular among Christians today and why is Christianity no longer believed to be a religion by so many Christians? Quite simply because Christians have believed what non-believers, secular humanists, have told them about the nature of the Christian faith, i.e. that it is only a devotional cultus and that it has no relevance to the rest of life. In particular they have been told by secularists that Christianity must be kept out of politics and social affairs altogether. It is the idolatrous religion of secular humanism that now functions as public truth, and therefore it is secular humanist politics that now dominates and controls our lives and our society, not Christianity. Secularists insist that Christianity has no business interfering in

⁴ See further, "Christianity as a Cult" in my book, *Common-Law Wives and Concubines: Essays on Covenantal Christianity and Contemporary Western Culture* (Taunton: The Kuyper Foundation, 2003), pp. 9–19.

these areas. Christianity is a private matter and Christians should keep their faith out of these affairs altogether. What is astonishing about this is not that secularists have argued in this way, but that Christians on the whole have agreed with them, followed their advice and confined their faith to what amounts to little more than a personal worship hobby.

But this restriction of the Christian faith to a narrow “spiritual” realm of life is not the Christian faith of the Bible or of history; it is, rather, a departure from it. Such a departure from the faith has occurred in previous ages among certain heretical sects and movements, but it has not been considered orthodox in the way that it is today. The Great Commission, by contrast, is a command to work for the creation of Christendom, to convert the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of Christ. This is, after all, what the Bible teaches will be the consequence of the Great Commission: “And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). “And the *nations* of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it [the heavenly city]: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it” (Rev. 21:24).

Let us now look at the implications of the three parts of the Great Commission.

§1

Discipling the Nations

First, we are told to disciple the *nations*.⁵ This first part of the command means that we are to work to bring the nations under the leadership and discipline of Jesus Christ. We are commanded

⁵ The lack of a verb meaning *to disciple* has largely been overcome today, at least in Church life, since we do now frequently and increasingly use the noun *disciple* as a verb, though it is still seldom understood to apply to the word *nations* as its direct object, which is what the Greek text of the New Testament gives us in Mt. 28:19. Hopefully the use of *disciple* as a verb will be introduced into future editions of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

to work for the establishing of Christian nations, and by implication where a nation has been Christian but has apostatised, as the United Kingdom has, we are to work for its repentance and restoration as a Christian nation.

It is essential that we do not understand the existence of a Christian nation to mean that such a nation would be perfect. There is no perfection in this life, whether at the individual, family, Church or national levels. But this does not mean that there can be no Christian nation, that God cannot be honoured nationally, the Church established, and the law of God enshrined in the nation's constitution as the basis of its system of justice, as indeed it has been in the past. No individual Christian is perfect in this life. This does not mean that there can be no individual Christians. No Christian family is perfect in this life. Neither does this mean there can be no Christian families, that a Christian family is just a collection of individual Christians who happen to live in the same house. A Christian family is much more than a boarding house for individual believers; it is a covenanted community under God. A Christian family has an ethos and practice that is Christian, or at least it should have. It has a way of life involving the honouring of God and obedience to his word, a shared understanding of the meaning of life and common standards of behaviour. No Christian society is perfect in this life. That does not mean there can be no Christian societies. The Church is a Christian society, a covenanted community under God. The fact that no Church is perfect in this life does not mean that there can be no Christian Church. And no Christian nation, which is a Christian society, a covenanted community under God, just as the family and the Church are Christian societies, covenanted communities under God, can be perfect in this life. That does not mean there can be no Christian nation. The denial of Christendom by modern Christians is preposterous. If the implications of the reasoning behind such a denial were to be followed out to their logical conclusions it would mean that there could be no Christian society, no Christian family and no Christian Church either. The fact that Christian nations are not perfect no more invalidates the possibility of a Christian

nation than the fact that Churches are not perfect invalidates the possibility of a Christian Church or the fact that Christian families are not perfect invalidates the possibility of a Christian family. It means rather, that we must pray and work for improvement just as we pray and work for improvement, progress, or to use more “religious” language, sanctification, in this life on the individual level, in our families and in our Churches. Even a brief look at the history of Christendom shows that there is progress, development in this, just as there is in the individual Christian life; and it shows also that there is backsliding and apostasy, which is demonstrated by the condition of Britain today. This should be of great concern to us. We should be concerned for the conversion of the nation as a nation, i.e. the conformity of its institutions, culture, justice system etc. to the will of Christ, just as much as we are concerned for the conversion of the individual soul and his submission to the lordship of Christ.

Britain has been a Christian nation for a long time. The coronation of the monarch and the coronation oath are Christian institutions, and the coronation service is a Christian Church service—it includes a communion service. The oath taken by the Queen at her coronation in 1953 included the promise to maintain the laws of God and the true profession of the gospel, and to maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law. The Bible was presented to the Queen while the Archbishop spoke the following words: “Our gracious Queen: to keep your Majesty ever mindful of the Law and the Gospel of God as the Rule for the whole life and government of Christian Princes, we present you with this book, the most precious thing this world affords.” The Moderator of the Church of Scotland then said: “Here is wisdom; This is the royal Law; These are the lively Oracles of God.”⁶ There then followed a communion service during which the Queen was anointed.

Now, the United Kingdom was not at that time, nor at any

⁶ *The Coronation Service of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, with a short Historical Introduction, Explanatory Notes and an Appendix by Edward C. Ratcliff* (London: SPCK/Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 38f.

time previously, a kingdom of perfectly sanctified people. But it was a Christian nation. And although there has been a great deal of grievous apostasy since 1953, it remains a Christian nation *constitutionally*. Whether it will remain so in the future remains to be seen, but the future does not look propitious. Why? Not only because the heir to the throne seems very far from being a Christian with any intention of functioning as a Christian monarch, nor merely because our governments seem so determined to obliterate all that is left of the Christian faith in our culture by trampling upon the Christian values and institutions that for so long constituted the soul of the nation, but also because the people are no longer concerned about being part of a Christian nation, and perhaps most significantly of all, because Christians themselves largely no longer believe in the value, nor even the possibility, of the country being a Christian nation. Christendom is a concept that has become obsolete in the minds of most Christians because of the adoption of a narrow other-worldly and predominantly effeminate spirituality—i.e. pietism—that bears little resemblance to the concept of spirituality given us in the Bible. And in order to maintain this faulty spirituality the greater part of the Bible, the Old Testament, has been spiritualised into irrelevance in most Churches because it is so difficult to reconcile with this pietistic spirituality. With the Old Testament marginalised in this way, the New Testament is cut off from its context, i.e. the Old Testament, and radically reinterpreted through a pietistic perspective. Because of the dominance of this pietistic spirituality it is thought on the whole today that the very idea of Christendom is no longer valid, and this in turn has contributed to the misunderstanding of the Great Commission as a command to convert individuals rather than nations. The result of this faulty theology, this misunderstanding of the Great Commission, has been the *de-commissioning* of the nation as a Christian nation. The popular pietistic misunderstanding of the Great Commission as a command to disciple individuals from among the nations has, ironically, led to the negation of the Great Commission, i.e. the *de-commissioning* of the nation, the very opposite of what Christ commanded.

§2

Baptising the Nations

Second, in the Great Commission we are told to baptise the *nations*. It is not uncommon at this point for Baptists to point out that the Scripture says “baptise *them*” not “baptise the *nations*” and that the reason for this is that it is not possible to baptise a nation, but only individuals from among the nations.⁷ There are two points to be considered here: first, it is unnatural to take “them” to refer to some imaginary individuals rather than to refer back to the natural antecedent, “nations,”⁸ and secondly, it *is* possible to baptise a nation.

Before we go on to consider *how* we baptise the nations, however, we need to understand what baptism of the nations means. The fundamental idea underpinning the practice of the Christian rite of baptism is *initiation* into the covenant community, the Church, by means of a symbolic washing, which signifies the washing away (i.e. forgiveness) of sin through the merit of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Baptism is the covenant rite of initiation into the body of Christ (communion is the covenant rite

⁷ Perhaps it is this kind of faulty reasoning that accounts for the New English Bible’s paraphrase of the Greek at Mt. 28:19b. The New English Bible reads: “Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples; baptise men everywhere in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The correct construing of v.19a is unusual for a modern translation, but it is completely ruined by the erroneous paraphrase of v.19b. The problem is the substitution of “men everywhere” for “them,” so that there is no longer a pronoun that refers back to the *nations* of v. 19a in the second part of the Commission, and the pronoun “them” in the third part of the Commission is consequently understood as referring back to the new direct object, “men everywhere,” which is erroneously introduced in the second part. A command to baptise “men everywhere” constitutes a mission that is very different from the command to baptise the *nations*, and it is the latter that the Greek text gives us, not the former. The focus of the mission is changed completely by the New English Bible’s reading. Instead of a command to baptise and teach the law of God to the nations we have an individualistic focus that completely fails to do justice to the socio-political implications of the Great Commission.

⁸ On the relevance of the gender disagreement between the noun *ἔθνη* and its pronoun *αὐτοὺς* see the Excursus on p. 36ff.

of *continuation* in the body of Christ). Baptism in the name of the Trinity signifies union between the one being baptised and the Lord Jesus Christ. Baptism, therefore, is the rite of initiation into the covenant life of faith in Christ and into the corporate covenant life of the Christian community. Baptism of a family (cf. Acts 16:33) is the initiation of the family into the body of Christ, and therefore into the covenant life of faith in Christ and into the corporate life of the Christian community. Likewise, baptism of the nation is the initiation of the nation into the corporate covenant life of faith in Christ. This corporate covenant life of faith as a Christian community includes, but is not limited to or exhausted by, submission to the rite of baptism by those who constitute the nation because this is the rite of initiation into the covenant and an important act of obedience to God's word. As the rite of initiation into the body of Christ, however, baptism points beyond itself to the reality of a life of faith as a member of the covenant community

Of course, the command to baptise a nation necessarily involves the baptising of individuals, but a command to baptise individuals does not necessarily involve the baptising of the nation. The difference is a question of mission. Is our mission to snatch brands from the fire or is it to disciple the nations? The Great Commission demands the latter. There is no reason to impose the individualistic obsession of modern Western culture onto the text. How then, one may ask, is it possible to baptise a nation, and how do we go about baptising a nation?

In order to answer this question we must consider another question and then examine one of the most important responsibilities that faces the Christian community, the baptism, upbringing and education of Christian children.

The question is this: is it possible to baptise a society or only individuals? If it is possible only to baptise individuals then the Church cannot exist as anything more than a mere collection of individuals who also happen to be baptised, because the Church is a *society*. But it is clear from the Bible that the Church is more than this. The Church is not a mere club for individual people. There are not many baptisms and many faiths in the Christian Church,

but one baptism and one faith (Eph. 4:4–6), and Christians are all baptised by one Spirit into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). The Church is defined, at least in part, by the rite of baptism. An un-baptised society cannot be a Christian Church. Baptism is the formal means of entry into the Church. If one is not baptised one is not accepted as a member of the Church.⁹ The Church is a baptised society.

But the Church, we are told in Scripture, is also a *nation*: “ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy *nation*” (1 Pet. 2:9). These words, written by Peter, are merely a restatement of the words spoken in Ex. 19:5–6 to the nation of Israel. Peter identifies and addresses the Church as a nation, just as Moses addressed the people of Israel as a nation. And the word chosen by the Holy Spirit to designate the body of Christ, the Church (ἐκκλησία), is a *political* term referring to the assembly of the people (δῆμος) as a political body. The Church is a baptised society, a covenanted community under God. This is far more than a mere collection of individuals. The Church is made up of individuals, but the members together constitute something more than a mere collection of individuals. If it were not possible to have a baptised society, only baptised individuals, then it would not be possible to have a Church, because the Church is a baptised society, nor would it be possible to have a baptised family, because the family is a society. This would be to say that all associations of individuals, such as families, societies and nations, are nothing more than conglomerates of individuals and that they can never add up to anything more than that. But it is clear from the Bible that God does *not* see families, Churches or *nations* in such an individualistic fashion, that although the individual is important, he is considered part of something greater than himself; he is part of a covenanted society. God always deals with mankind by means of a covenant. The relationship that man

⁹ This does not mean that an unbaptised person cannot be a believer or regenerate, i.e. exercise saving faith in Jesus Christ; it means that an unbaptised person should not be accepted as a member of the Church until he is baptised in the name of the Trinity. Nor does it mean that a baptised person is necessarily regenerate; it means that he should be accepted as a member of the Church, unless he is apostate or openly living in scandalous and unrepentant sin.

has to God is always a covenantal relationship. Man is always a covenant creature and therefore he always stands in a covenantal relationship to God. This covenantal relationship with God also determines man's relationship to the rest of the world. In other words, the covenant structures not only man's relationship with God but also his relationship with other people and the world around him. It is important to understand at this point, therefore, that the covenant is not merely individualistic; it is also societal, at the family level, at the Church level, and also at the *national* level. Surely it will not be denied that it is possible for a nation to be in covenant with God. The nation of Israel was. And as such Israel was called to be an example to and the pattern for *all* the nations (Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; Is. 2:1–4). And Christ came to *fulfil* the law and the prophets, to bring them to full development, not to abrogate them (Mt. 5:17). This is why Christ commanded his disciples to disciple *all* the *nations*.

If the modern individualistic view were correct there could be no Church, not in the biblical sense of one body where each member belongs to something greater than himself. The Church is a society of people, a *baptised* society.¹⁰ And the Church is a family, a family of adopted sons of God. Baptism is the formal act of adoption into this family. Just as it is possible to baptise a family, which is a small society, and we have the testimony of Scripture in this (Acts 16:33), so also it is possible to baptise a larger society. When someone is baptised he is baptised into a covenanted *nation*, the Church. Why then is it insisted upon by so many today that it is impossible to baptise a nation?

Such a theology is both a symptom of and a contributing factor in the persistence of the pietistic spirituality that dominates modern Church life in the UK, and it is this pietistic spirituality that has played such an important role in the progressive decommissioning of the Christian nations of the West. E. L. Hebden Taylor stated the problem clearly:

¹⁰ The word *society* comes from the Latin verb *socio*, meaning *to unite together, associate, to do or to hold in common, to share*.

[P]ietism, no doubt, expressed the religious reaction of devout evangelicals against orthodox formalism, and it tended to concentrate upon the doctrine of salvation and to develop an Arminian rather than a Reformed doctrine of grace. God's offer of salvation was supposed to be made to all men and it was believed that Christ died for all mankind. Given such a doctrine of grace it is not surprising that pietists have tended, with a few notable exceptions, to think of religion as being mainly concerned with the salvation of the individual and with his spiritual states of mind and feelings. As a consequence, pietism has greatly assisted the secularization of Western society as a whole, since its religious individualism takes for granted or ignores the structures of church and state, seeking within society to build up significant religious cells. The main concern of Dutch pietists, as of Wesleyan pietists in England and America, became the salvation of one's individual soul rather than of society as a whole. Instead of thinking that Christians should be concerned with the whole of life—business, political, educational and cultural, pietism demands the segregation of a certain sphere of life as peculiarly religious and teaches that the believer should concentrate his entire efforts upon cultivating subjective religious states of mind and feeling, as well as various personal devotional and ascetic disciplines. The larger questions of church and state and culture tend to become discounted, sometimes because of apocalyptic expectations, or because they are considered to be religiously neutral. As a result, the attention of the evangelical pietist tended to become concentrated upon personal rather than social morals, and the sins of the flesh have been more often feared than the spiritual sins, such as selfishness, pride, envy and jealousy.¹¹

Pietism—the reduction of the Christian life to a personal devotional hobby with an essentially effeminate agenda—has saddled the Church with a spirituality that has been unable to meet the challenges that face her in the modern world. As a result the practice of the faith in the twentieth century collapsed under the weight of the secular humanist opposition to Christian values. It collapsed because it was not strong enough, not robust enough, to meet the challenge of the growing secular humanist faith, and this was in large part because pietistic spirituality had weakened the ability of Christians to see the whole of life as the arena of

¹¹ E. L. Hebden Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1966), p. 29f.

their faith, as their mission field; individuals *from* all nations were seen as needing to convert to Christianity, but *nations* as such were no longer seen as needing to be conquered for Christ. This vitiated the witness of the Church by holding forth a pietistic vision of the Christian faith that is irrelevant to real life and therefore irrelevant and useless to society. The Church's pietistic world-view is no match for the secular humanism and neo-paganism that increasingly dominate our society.

How has this faulty spirituality been worked out in the practice of the modern Church? First, the general practice of most Churches today, at least in the UK, is to send the children out of the Church service to Sunday school until they reach an age at which they are believed to be able to make a decision about the faith for themselves. What is the message that children get from this practice? It is this: children do not understand, and therefore the faith is not relevant and does not apply to them as it does to adults who have "made a decision." Of course they are kept happy with Bible stories in Sunday school when they are little, and they may be taught *about* the faith as they get older, but the message is that Christianity is not really for them, not yet anyway. They are not old enough to understand. This is the message children get even if it is not stated overtly—and it *is* very often stated overtly. Despite the fact that Jesus said "Suffer the little children to come unto me and hinder them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mk 10:14; Lk. 18:17), the Church has sent the children out of the worship of the covenant community and told them that this is not for them, and that they will have to make their own minds up about the faith when they become adults. This may not have been stated blatantly but it is the message that children get from this practice. In some respects the more subtle a message is the more effective it is, even for children. Children are told on the whole that they are not part of the covenant community and participation in the covenant rituals is denied them—and unfortunately baptism, the Lord's Supper and Church worship is all that exists of the covenant life of faith in most Churches. Even where baptism is administered to infants and therefore nominally children are deemed to be in-

cluded in the covenant life of the Church the constant removal of children from the worship service and the refusal to admit them to the Lord's Supper is a practical excommunication that puts them outside what little is left of the covenant life of the faith in modern Churches. In this respect the difference between Baptist and modern paedobaptist theology is insignificant in practice. Most paedobaptist Churches are really only half-cocked Baptist Churches. Children are denied participation in the covenant life of the Church in both systems.

Second, Christian parents have very strongly and powerfully reinforced this message by sending their children to be educated in secular schools where their children's world-view is formed under the influence of a godless religion, secular humanism, in terms of a curriculum that denies the Christian God and teaches children that the world and all things in it can be understood independently of the God who created it. This reinforces the pietistic understanding of the faith that children are taught in church and see practised by their parents, i.e. the belief that the faith has a narrow spiritual application to the devotional life and the unseen world, the afterlife. This is the version of Christianity that secular humanists have foisted upon lazy Christians who refuse to use their minds in the service of God. The faith for these people is not about life and having one's *mind* renewed by the Holy Spirit so that the Christian sees *all* things in a new way, in a new relationship to God. Rather, it is about going to church to sing choruses, developing one's "quiet time" and being delivered from the torments of hell at death. The faith is a form of escapism essentially; escape from this world here and now into some unseen "spiritual" realm and escape from hell in the afterlife. In this context everything children learn at school about the world and life as being independent of God and irrelevant to the Christian faith of their parents makes sense; it fits with the kind of faith practised by their parents and taught in church. Christianity in this perspective is not a religion, it is a private worship hobby. The real religion that determines how Christian children think and live and how their parents think and live for most of their lives is secular humanism, which reaches all

those parts of the body politic that the pietistic version of Christianity fails to touch. This kind of Christianity has been aptly described as “coarse mysticism,” i.e. “an intermittent surrender to pietistic conceptions and spiritual ideas, which in no way interferes with the materialism of the ordinary life.”¹²

One of the consequences of this pietistic understanding of the faith is that education has been divorced from the mission of the gospel. This has had disastrous consequences for both the Church and the nation. The secular schooling system is a complete indoctrination into the secular humanist world-view. In Britain teachers in State schools are charged with the intellectual, physical, emotional and *spiritual* education of the child. This is a complete education in terms of a world-view, a religion, that denies God. And even if these children go to church and are taught that Jesus will save them from hell-fire on the Day of Judgement if they believe in him, they see there that the faith as practised by their parents and the Church does not address life, only issues relating to their parents’ personal devotion hobby and their expectations of the afterlife. *This* life is governed by a different religion: secular humanism, and an hour of Sunday school once each week is no match for five full days of indoctrination each week in the Baalist religion of secular humanism.

In this sense most Christians in the West today are polytheists, i.e. they do not worship one God, but several. They serve the Christian God on Sundays and in those matters relating to their narrowly defined spiritual lives—Church worship, “quiet times,” their beliefs about soteriology, the afterlife and eschatology—but in their everyday lives, in the education of their children, their political beliefs, their cultural lives generally, they serve the gods of secular humanism, including secular humanism’s chief god, the idolatrous secular State.¹³

Having refused to baptise their children; having sent them out

¹² H. Wheeler Robinson. *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, [1911] 1926), p. 349.

¹³ See further my essay *Baal Worship Ancient and Modern* (Taunton: Kuyper Foundation, 2010).

of the Church worship service for most of their lives because it is deemed unsuitable for them; having told them that the Lord's Supper is not for them; having told them that they must make their own minds up about the Christian faith when they become adults; and having sent them to godless secular schools for the whole of their school life (the most formative period in their lives) to be indoctrinated into the religion of secular humanism;—in other words having effectively excommunicated their children from the covenant life of faith from birth, parents then turn round to them when they reach adolescence and ask them to make a decision about the faith. Then they are shocked and upset when their children respond by saying: "Well, I've thought about it and I've decided it's not for me." What else should such parents expect? Education is not religiously or spiritually neutral. In fact nothing we do as human beings is religiously or spiritually neutral. If we fail to give our children a Christian education we give them instead, wittingly or unwittingly, a *non-Christian* education, e.g. a secular humanist education, which is not a religiously neutral education but rather an education that is in rebellion against God. So many parents seem to think they should not "indoctrinate" their children with the Christian faith. But their determination to avoid what they call "indoctrinating" their children with the Christian religion has led them, unwittingly perhaps, to *indoctrinate* their children with secular humanism, a *religion* that teaches that man is the master of his own fate. Why then should they be upset or disappointed when their children demonstrate, by their "decision," the belief that *they* are the captains of their own fate, not Jesus Christ?

It is the duty of Christians to bring their children up in the faith, *as* Christians, teaching them to see the world and everything in it in relation to the God who created it. This gets called "indoctrination" both by non-believers and by many Christians, and yet somehow subjecting one's children to a godless secular education is not seen as indoctrination. But it is. It is the worst form of indoctrination a parent can subject his children to because it will turn them into consistent secular humanists and neo-pagans with a world-view that is in rebellion against God.

Parents may think that their children are making their own minds up about the faith, “making their own decision.” But they are not. Children in such a context will no more make their own minds up about the faith than children who have been “indoctrinated” with their parents’ Christian faith. Their minds have already been formed by the godless atheistic education, the godless world-view, that they have imbibed in the secular schooling system. But their minds should be formed by a Christian education, a Christian world-view imbibed in a Christian school or in terms of a Christian home schooling education, because only such an education can equip them for life in the real world, namely the world that God created and that he providentially governs according to his own will. This is the world they must live in, not the godless world that secular humanists imagine exists. Surely, it is the purpose of an education to equip children for life. If children are to be equipped for life in the real world, God’s world, they must be equipped with a Christian world-view, not a godless secular humanist world-view. The only world that exists out there is God’s world. The secular humanist world-view is false, a fantasy, and those who live in terms of that world-view will waste their lives. Christians must provide their children with an education in terms of a Christian world-view not a secular humanist world-view. An education in either context will condition the child’s understanding of life.

Even if children who are sent to secular schools do become Christians by God’s grace, this will not mean that they will suddenly become Christian in their thinking, that their world-view will instantly become a Christian world-view. It will not. They may well spend the rest of their lives unlearning the secular world-view that they imbibed at school and learning to think in terms of a Christian world-view. This will take time and it will be difficult because it is not just a matter of learning the truth, but also a process of deprogramming the mind, which has been thoroughly programmed to think in a way that is contrary to the Christian world-view by the secular schooling system, which has its effect in the most formative period of a person’s life. There is a saying: “it is hard to teach an old dog new tricks.” It is not impossible

for adults to change their world-view, but it is more difficult to inculcate a new world-view in an adult than it is to raise a child in such a world-view from the beginning, which is much more effective. But unfortunately, as adult converts to the Christian faith they may very well *not* spend the rest of their lives learning the Christian world-view, but instead go through life with saved souls and wasted lives, trusting Christ for their salvation from hell but living like secular humanists in terms of a secular humanist world-view, as so many Christians live today. They may well never understand the effect that the secular world-view has had on them and never see the need to bring their thinking about the whole of life into a correct relation to God and his law. Their Christian faith may well amount to nothing more than a form of escapism in this life and a good hell-fire insurance policy for the next, which is how many Christians see the faith, i.e. not as a *religion* to live by but as a safety net for the afterlife. They may well see Christianity as essentially not about *life* at all, but rather about *death*. In this kind of perspective Christ is seen as coming to save men not from their *sin*, but merely from its unfortunate consequences at death. Children brought up with this narrow pietistic understanding of the faith will therefore probably get no further than their parents in the Christian life, and in an aggressively secular culture such as the West has become, they will most likely go backwards and end up with *less* understanding than their parents had. The purpose of an education is to prepare and train a child for life. If we give someone a secular humanist education we prepare and train him for a secular humanist life. He may well have a saved soul as an adult convert to the Christian faith, but if his understanding of the faith is pietistic and focused merely on the devotional life, Church and the afterlife, his life will largely be lived in terms of the secular humanist understanding of Christianity imbibed in his youth, i.e. he will see the Christian faith not as a religion to live by but as a personal devotional hobby that will pay off well when he dies.

How can we expect to convert and baptise the *nation* while this remains the practice of the greater part of the Church? It is impossible for our society, our nation, to be discipled to Christ until

we start educating the next generation in terms of the Christian faith. Without this children get no further in their Christian lives than their parents, which is often not very far at all. The abandonment of Christian education and the secular State's usurpation of parental responsibility in the education of children, along with the willingness of Christians to hand their children over to non-believers to be indoctrinated into the religion of secular humanism in the secular schools, has been and continues to be one of the major contributing factors to the decommissioning of Britain as a *Christian* nation because it has produced a generation of people who live in terms of the denial of God in all they think and do. Even Christians educated in the secular world-view will most likely deny God in much of their lives. Although they may have saved souls they may well on the whole remain rebellious in the way they live their lives, refusing to submit to the lordship of Christ in most areas of life. This is the situation we have in the British Church today. Sending our children to secular schools that operate in terms of this rebellious secular humanist world-view is a contradiction of the Great Commission. It will not help to disciple the nation in any sense; it is rather a significant aspect of the decommissioning of the nation as a Christian nation. It is part of the great decommissioning, an abdication of parental responsibility by Christian parents that is a contradiction, an overturning, of the Great Commission.

The answer to this problem is for parents to baptise their children as Christians, because God has made a promise to them as parents (Acts 2:39), *and* to bring them up as Christians in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), which is what baptism implies. To baptise one's children into the Christian faith and then to send them to secular schools to be indoctrinated into the religion of secular humanism is to accept the outward rite of baptism but to *deny* the reality it signifies. Baptism implies raising our children as Christians and giving them a Christian education in terms of a Christian world-view. But this involves far more than merely the academic, though it includes academic education as well. It involves the whole of our children's development, and this

means also that they must be fully included in the covenant life of the Church. It is the whole process that will inform and shape the minds of our children and inculcate in them a Christian world-view that will prepare them for the whole of life, which is their mission field. Our children's minds will either be formed by a Christian world-view or they will be *de*-formed by a secular humanist world-view. If we wish to disciple the nation to Christ we must not send our children to secular schools to be indoctrinated into the atheistic world-view of the secular establishment. We must provide a Christian alternative, either in Christian schools or by means of Christian home schooling, and the Church must be fully behind this, both by encouraging it and facilitating it, especially where parents face insurmountable difficulties without the help of the Church.

When a whole generation has been brought up and educated in this way, in terms of a Christian world-view, we shall begin to see the discipling of the nation to Christ. The results of this approach will be far more effective than the meagre results of lobbying, which many Christians seem to think exhausts their duty in the public sphere.

This is what baptism of the nation implies. The task involves far more than baptising adult converts, though obviously it includes that as well. It implies far more than the mere rite of baptism. Baptism in the name of the Trinity is the rite of *initiation* into the body of Christ and therefore into the covenant life of faith. This implies a new way of life for those involved, whether an individual or a family, from baptism onwards. Likewise, baptising the nation involves baptising individuals and families, but it implies far more than the mere performance of the rite. Just as baptism of the individual and of the family is the initiation of the individual and the family being baptised into the covenant life of faith, so also baptism of the nation (i.e. of the individuals and families that constitute the nation) is the initiation of the *nation* into the covenant life of faith. This covenant life of faith requires the baptism of our children and an education in terms of the Christian faith in the whole of life from birth onwards while they are under our care

so that when they reach adulthood they can live life fully in terms of the Christian world-view and in their turn bring up the next generation in the same way. This is how we disciple the nations.

If you do not want this you do not have to have it. You can bring your children up as non-believers, give them a secular education and then evangelise them when they reach adolescence or adulthood. They may even become Christians and begin a life-long struggle to divest themselves of the secular humanist world-view foisted upon them as children by the secular schooling system, or possibly—indeed probably given the present spiritual climate in the Church—they will simply go through the rest of their lives as pietists with a dualistic understanding of the faith, unable to relate their faith to the real world and their everyday lives. But do not expect the discipling of the nation to Christ as a result. It will not happen because the *de*-commissioning of the nation is the inevitable outcome of such a theology and practice, as is evident from the situation prevailing in Britain today. Far more than this is required if we are to disciple the nation.

Baptising the nation requires the baptism of our children, which signifies initiation into the Christian life in its fulness and therefore implies raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. This means that each generation must be initiated into the whole covenant life of the Church and educated in terms of a Christian world-view. We cannot baptise a nation without baptising our children into the faith and bringing them up as Christians. It will take several generations and a great deal of sacrifice and hard work to accomplish this. But it will work because God is in it. It is his will and command to his Church and he will accomplish it through his Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. He will not accomplish it in any other way. Christianity does not work by magic. God works through his Church, the body of Christ on earth. It is through the witness and work of the Church that the nations will be disciplined. But only if the Church embraces that work obediently. Baptising the nation, therefore, requires the adoption of a multigenerational covenant theology *and* a way of life that conforms to that theology in practice, not merely in word.

§3

Teaching God's Law to the Nations

Third, in the Great Commission we are commanded to teach the law of God to the nations: “all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” And what is the command of Christ? Christ came to fulfil the law, to bring it to full expression, to completion, i.e. to put it fully into effect. He did not come to abrogate it (Mt. 5:17). He appeared on the mount of transfiguration in the presence of Moses and Elijah to confirm the gospel’s continuity with the law and the prophets (Mt. 17:1–8; Mk 9:2–8). “If ye love me” says Jesus “keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15). What are his commandments? They are the commandments of God. How do we know this? Because Jesus tells us so. He and the Father are one (Jn 10:30). He came to do the will of the Father (Jn 4:34; 5:20; 8:28–30). He came in his Father’s name (Jn 5:43). He kept his father’s commandments (Jn 15:10). Moses wrote about Christ (Jn 1:45; 5:46). Christ told the Jews that if they had believed Moses they would have believed him (Jn 5:46). Jesus asked the Jews, and he asks us the same question today: “if ye believe not his [i.e. Moses’] writings, how shall ye believe my words?” (Jn. 5:47). Christ tells us that the great commandments are to love God and our neighbour (Mk 12:28–31). How do we do this? The Bible tells us that we do this by fulfilling, i.e. by *keeping*, the law of God (Jn 14:15; Rom. 13:8–10).¹⁴

¹⁴ The word translated as “fulfilment” in Rom. 13:10, *πλήρωμα*, means the *performance* of the law. Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* gives the following definition of the word in the context of Rom. 13:10: “4. The ‘act of filling’; a. active: as *ἀγάπη* is not an ethical disposition, so *πλήρωμα* in R[om]. 13:10 is not a formal ethical concept (‘sum’). Both words refer to the act. Loving conduct is a ‘complete and entire fulfilment’ of what God demands in the Law. An act[ive] meaning is suggested for R[om]. 13:10 by v. 8b . . . We have a compact train of thought in vv. 8b–10b. The statement in 8b is proved in 9–10a (v. 9 *γάρ*) and then recapitulated in 10b when proof has been given (*οὖν*). The argument would be poorly handled, however, if *πλήρωμα* had the same meaning as *ἀνακεφαλαιούται* [summing up], which is part of the actual proof. *πλήρωμα*, then, does not mean ‘sum’; it is the ‘complete fulfilment’ of the Law in deed,

Yet we have today in the West a form of Christianity that is hostile to God's law. This has not always been so. In previous ages the Church has fully recognised the importance of God's law and its essential role in her mission to disciple the nations. But not as a form of self-righteousness or a means of justification. The law was never meant to function in that way, not even in the Old Testament. Its function rather is as a positive way of life, a standard or rule of life. The law is, after all, a transcript of God's righteousness, and we are to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (Mt. 5:48). This means that our goal must be to conform to God's will as it is revealed in his law.

There can therefore be no discipling of the nations without the nations' embracing God's law. And this was how the Church understood the Great Commission in past ages. This is not a new doctrine; it is the orthodox doctrine of the Church, and it is historically what happened. The Christian religion was described in mediaeval times as *lex Christiana* (the Christian law) as opposed to *lex Muhametana* (Muslim religion) and *lex Antichristi* (pagan religion).¹⁵ English common law was shaped under the influence of the Christian concepts of justice and equity. A doctrine of the common law stated that "Any law is or of right ought to be according to the law of God."¹⁶ Likewise, equity was aimed at upholding justice in terms of God's law.¹⁷ The British justice system was based on

and in this sense it is the opp[osite] of the formal ἀνακεφαλαιοῦνται" (Gerhard Delling, "πλήρωμα" in Kittel and Friedrich, *op. cit.*, Vol. VI, p. 305). Likewise C. K. Barrett: "The meaning of 'complete fulfilment' (πλήρωμα) is disputed, but it must be decided in the light of the use of the cognate verb in v. 8. The man who loves has fulfilled the law, that is, he has done what the law requires; the love, therefore, which he exercises constitutes the fulfilment of the law's requirement. Thus love is not the *completion* but the *performance* of the law. V. 9 shows that by the law Paul means the Old Testament law in its preceptual character" (*The Epistle to the Romans* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957], p. 251).

¹⁵ Thomas Schirrmacher, "Lex' (Law) as Another Word for Religion: A Lesson from the Middle Ages" in *Calvinism Today*, Vol. II, No. 2 (April 1992), p. 5.

¹⁶ This statement is taken from a Year Book of Henry VII's reign (cited in A. K. R. Kiralfy, *Potter's Historical Introduction to English Law* [London: Sweet and Maxwell Ltd, Fourth Edition, 1958], p. 33).

¹⁷ See my book, *Christianity and Law: An Enquiry into the Influence of Christianity on the Development of English Common Law* (Avant Books, 1993), p. 44 and *passim*

God's law and a Christian understanding of the rule of law. This is why the British justice system was in the past so effective. There is a qualitative difference between the justice systems of those nations that have embraced the Christian faith and those that have not. Our civilisation, and Western civilisation generally, has been superior to the civilisations of pagan nations in so many ways because it has been a Christian civilisation. The justice systems of the Christian nations have been superior to the barbarous systems of justice found in pagan cultures because the justice systems of Christian nations have come under the disciplining influence of God's law. The establishing of God's law as the basis upon which justice is understood and practised has been an essential part of the fulfilling of the Great Commission, and without it in future there will be no progress in the Great Commission.

Yet today we have a Church that largely denies the relevance of God's law. Is there any wonder that non-believers have abandoned it and that now we are seeing the progressive de-Christianising of the Western nations? At the time of the Reformation in England the Ten Commandments were put up on large boards in all the churches for the people to read and the Ten Commandments were read aloud in church every Sunday.¹⁸ During the twentieth century the Ten Commandments were taken down in most churches and they are no longer read in most church services. What sort of message does this give to the nation? It is a message that fits well with the pietistic view of the Christian faith that dominates Church life today, namely the idea that the Christian faith has no relevance to the nation or the public sphere; it is a private devotional cult. The Church in England no longer believes it is her duty to preach the law of God. The consensus of opinion in the Church, among both clergy and laymen, is that God's law does not apply to the nation. It is not even deemed to apply to the individual any more, let alone to the nation. To preach such a negative message about God's law is to engage in the *de*-commissioning of the nation as a Christian nation.

¹⁸ J. W. C. Wand, *Anglicanism in History and Today* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), p. 79.

Britain today is in the process of being decommissioned as a Christian nation. The process is almost complete, and Christians who have argued that God's law does not apply to the nations, that we are not under obligation to obey it and base our justice system upon it, are complicit with that process of decommissioning of the nation as a Christian nation. The rejection of God's law not only as a personal standard of moral behaviour but also as a standard upon which the nation should base its legislation and justice system is a denial and an overturning of the Great Commission. Where a nation has already been a Christian nation the rejection of God's law is a reversing, a wrecking, of what Christians of previous generations worked for and with God's help achieved. And it is what some of them gave their lives for. British justice and the concept of the rule of law as this has been understood historically in the West was based upon the law of God.¹⁹

The preaching of God's law is a vital aspect of the Great Commission to disciple the nations. The Bible tells us that the law of God shall go forth from Zion and that all the peoples of the earth shall come to Zion to learn the law of God, and that as a result of this the nations will learn to live in peace (Is. 2:1-4). Was this written only for the Jews? Hardly. It has never been fulfilled. It is unfulfilled prophesy. Is this of relevance for us today? Of course it is. It is only the establishing of God's law as the foundation of our justice systems that will enable the nations of the world to achieve peace. Only as God's law is embraced by the nations will the people of the world be delivered from the injustice that characterises so much of contemporary world politics.

Yet today the Church is going backwards, along with our secular humanist culture, because she has, along with our society generally, abandoned the law of God as the standard of justice that should govern the life of the nation. Our society has suffered immensely from the abandonment of God's law as the standard of personal and social behaviour and as the basis of our understand-

¹⁹ On the religious foundations of Western legal systems generally see Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1983).

ing of justice, and as a nation we shall continue to decline in this way until God's law is re-established as the standard of conduct required not only in our personal lives but also as the standard upon which our national system of justice should be based.

The Bible does not give us a negative view of God's law, either in the Old Testament *or* the New. Rather, it stresses the perfection of God's law and its role in providing guidance for mankind personally and nationally (Ps. 19:7–11; Is. 2:2–4). The law of God is the law of *Christ*, and we are commanded in the Great Commission to teach the law of God to the nations. Only as this is accomplished will the blessing of Is. 2:2–4 be realised, since what Isaiah describes is the accomplishment of the Great Commission.

§4

Conclusion

To sum up, the Great Commission consists of three commands, or a command in three parts: (1) the discipling of the nations, (2) the baptising of the nations, and (3) the teaching of God's law to the nations. And it is the *nations* that are the object of each part of the command, not merely individuals from among the nations. The Great Commission does not command us to go out converting individuals, snatching brands from the fire. It commands us to disciple the *nations*.

This understanding of the nature and practice of the Great Commission produces very different results from the idea of the Great Commission as a command to convert individuals from among the nations. Discipling the nations necessarily involves the conversion of individuals to the Christian faith. There can be no Christian nation without individual Christians. But a command to convert individuals to the Christian faith does not necessarily mean that this will lead to the discipling of the nation, especially in the spiritual climate that dominates Church life in the West today, where the faith is seen in narrow terms as a personal devotional hobby with no relevance to the nation socially or politically. Con-

verting individuals does not necessarily lead to the discipling of the nations. Discipling the nation is impossible without converting individuals to the faith, but it also involves far more than this.

Unfortunately, as a result of the modern misunderstanding of the nature of the Christian faith as a private devotional hobby, and the Great Commission as a command to disciple individuals, the Great Commission has been turned into the very opposite of what Jesus commanded, namely the Great De-commission. Under the influence of this individualistic, privatised, dualistic understanding of the faith the Church has engaged in the decommissioning of the nation.

The dominant contemporary view of the Christian faith as a subjective, private, devotional faith that does not engage with the world is not biblical. The Bible does not see the faith in terms of a personal worship hobby, but rather as a religion that overcomes and transforms the world. The Christian faith is *public* truth, and public truth is *religion*. Very many Christians today, however, deny that Christianity is a religion. And it has to be recognised that for these people it is not a religion. It is merely a worship hobby. An important hobby no doubt, with eternal consequences. It comes with a good hell-fire insurance policy; nonetheless it is essentially a hobby. But in denying that Christianity is a religion Christians have unwittingly denied it the status of public truth, with dire consequences for the life of the nation. The purpose of the Christian faith is not merely to transform the believer's personal life and make him more holy. It is to glorify God by transforming the world, by bringing the world under the discipline of Jesus Christ and his word. The Christian faith is a political and social faith as well as a personal faith; its mission begins with the individual, but it does not *terminate* on the individual but on the whole world, which is to be brought into subjection to the will of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If we are to win the world for Christ we must take the Great Commission seriously as a commission to bring the *nations* of the earth under the discipline of Jesus Christ not only by preaching the gospel of personal salvation through faith in Christ but also by discipling and baptising the nations and teaching the law of God

to the nations. Do not expect to see the return of Christ before this happens. Why not? Because the Bible tells us what the world will be like when the Great Commission has been fulfilled: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Is. 2:2–4). And this picture of the fulfilment of the Great Commission is confirmed in the New Testament. “And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven saying, The kingdoms of *this* world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

EXCURSUS

In the first part of the Great Commission in Mt. 28:19a the command is to disciple *ἔθνη*, “nations,” which is accusative plural *neuter*; subsequently in vv. 19b and 20 the command is to baptise and teach “them,” *αὐτοὺς*, accusative plural *masculine*. Much has been made of this gender disagreement between the word *nations* and the subsequent pronoun *them* by Baptists, since a command to baptise nations poses a problem for Baptist theology. For example, in his commentary on this passage John Gill states: “*baptizing them*; not all nations, for the antecedent to the relative *them*, cannot be *all nations*: since *παντα τα εθνη*, the words for *all nations*, are of the neuter gender, whereas *αυτους*, *them*, is of the masculine . . .”²⁰

²⁰ John Gill, *An Exposition of the New Testament* (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1852), Vol. I, p. 305b.

According to John Gill, therefore, the direct object of the second and third parts of the Great Commission is different from that of the first part and understood—i.e. only implied, not stated. The word “them” cannot refer to the nations, but must instead refer only to those disciplined from among the nations. Why? According to the Baptist view simply because the pronoun uses a masculine case while its antecedent, the “nations,” is in the neuter. Some other antecedent must be supplied mentally therefore in order to account for the gender disagreement. Of course this is very convenient for Baptist theology, which would face considerable problems if this were not so. But is this a valid argument?

The rationale for the Baptist argument is that the Greek is grammatically incorrect unless we assume some antecedent other than the noun to which the pronoun most naturally refers, i.e. “nations.” But the Greek does not require this grammatical strictness and the New Testament is consistent with Greek grammar in using a masculine plural pronoun to refer back to a neuter plural noun. According to Blass and Debrunner’s *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* “The so-called *constructio ad sensum*, without following any fixed rules, was very widespread in Greek from early times and is found in the N[ew] T[estament] as in the papyri . . . Feminine or neuter personal collectives standing in the plural may be continued by a masculine plural.”²¹ They then give an example from Gal. 1:22–23 where Paul says “and [I] was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: but they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed.” In v. 22 the noun *ἐκκλησίαις*, “churches,” which is feminine plural, is continued in the following verse by *ἀκούοντες ἦσαν*, “they were hearing.” But *ἀκούοντες* is a masculine plural present active participle. According to the strict rule of agreement demanded by those who insist that at Mt. 28:19–20 *αὐτοὺς* cannot refer back to *ἔθνη* because of the gender disagreement, the construction in Gal. 1:22–23 is also ungrammatical and for the same reason *ἀκούοντες*

²¹ F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *op. cit.*, §134, p. 74*af.* (cf. §282, p. 147*b*).

in v. 23 cannot refer back to the noun *ἐκκλησίαις* in v. 22. Some other antecedent therefore must be understood.²² But of course this is quite unnecessary. The phrase “they had heard” (lit. “they were hearing”) in Gal. 1:23 quite naturally refers to the “churches” of v. 22, even though the participle *ἀκούοντες* is masculine. This shows therefore that such a strict rule of agreement is neither required by Greek grammar nor practised by Greek writers.

Furthermore, the New Testament was written in the vulgar language of the people, not in the high prose of classical Greek literature. The New Testament is ungrammatical in a number of places. Spoken language does not always follow the strict rules of grammar used in literature and the New Testament is written in the kind of language spoken by the people. Suppose for the sake of argument, however, that strict agreement must be maintained and that any departure from it in such cases indicates something other than the plain meaning of the text. In John 16:13 we are told “When *he*, the *Spirit* of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.” The word “he,” *ἐκεῖνος*, a *masculine* demonstrative pronoun, is here continued by the word “Spirit,” *πνεῦμα*, which is *neuter*. In other words there is no gender agreement between the noun and the pronoun. How are we to interpret this verse if “he” cannot refer to the Holy Spirit? And what does this say of the gender of the Holy Spirit? The theory requiring strict gender agreement fails here. The neuter “Spirit” and the masculine pronoun must refer to each other no matter how ungrammatical this is. To complicate things still further, sometimes strict grammar *is* adhered to, showing that such grammatical points cannot determine the sense of the text merely on their own merits. For example, John 14:17 speaks of “the *Spirit* of truth; *whom* the world cannot receive, because it seeth *him* [lit. *it*] not.” *πνεῦμα*, “Spirit,” is neuter, and the pronouns

²² This is the position taken, for example, by H. A. W. Meyer: “The *masculine* refers to the *persons* of whom those *ἐκκλησίαι* consisted” (*Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Galatians* [Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, (1883) 1979, trans. G. H. Venables], p. 36). Likewise Ernest De Witt Burton: “The logical subject of the sentence is the members of the churches mentioned in v. 22; note the gender of the participle *ἀκούοντες*” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1921], p. 64).

ὁ, “whom,” and αὐτό, “him” (lit. “it”), are neuter also. Likewise in Rom. 8:16 we are told “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.” The Greek term πνεῦμα, “spirit,” which is neuter, is here followed by a neuter pronoun, αὐτό, “itself” (likewise in v. 26). Does this mean the Holy Spirit is not a person but a force? Some would argue that way. But in John 16:13, as we have seen, the demonstrative pronoun is used in the *masculine* to refer to the Spirit, which is *neuter*. What does all this prove then? Precisely nothing! No theological weight can be laid upon the gender agreement or disagreement between a pronoun and its referent in such cases without the risk of distorting the overall teaching of the Bible (e.g. if we insist that the Spirit is not a person but a force because the Greek term πνεῦμα is neuter we distort the witness of Scripture elsewhere).

Likewise in Mt. 28:19–20. To insist that “them” cannot refer to “nations” is to make the grammar of the ordinary spoken Greek of the New Testament bear a weight it was never intended to bear. Furthermore, such a strict rule is not required by Greek grammar and evidence from the New Testament elsewhere demonstrates that such a strict rule is in fact not observed. Indeed, according to Blass and Debrunner, as we have seen, it was not even observed in classical Greek from early times.

This being the case, an argument for not taking “them” to refer back to “nations” in Mt. 28:19–20 would need to be demonstrated from other passages in Scripture. But the Bible bears witness that the result of the Great Commission is emphatically *not* that mere individuals from among the nations will be discipled to Christ; rather it is that the kingdoms of *this* world will become the kingdom of Christ (Rev. 11:15). These two texts, Mt. 28:19–20 and Rev. 11:15, represent the Alpha and Omega of eschatology. If we wish to know what Mt. 28:19–20 means, what its purpose and end result is, we have it spelled out clearly in Rev. 11:15, namely the conversion of the *nations*, the kingdoms of *this* world, to Christ, since “the *nations* of them which are saved shall walk in the light of it [i.e. the city of God]: and the kings of the earth do bring their glory and honour into it” (Rev. 21:24 cf. Is. 2:2–4).

In the light of these considerations the argument for taking “them” to refer not to the “nations” but to some other understood antecedent has little to commend it and appears to be driven rather by a prior theological commitment. In other words, it appears to be an attempt to explain away the plain meaning of Scripture and import into the text a reading more amenable to Baptist theology. To introduce into the text a different antecedent, understood rather than expressed, is neither necessary grammatically nor natural to the plain meaning of the words. All three parts of the command relate to the nations *as* nations.