

Embracing the Great Commission

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Today marks the seventh Sunday of the Easter season, as well as Ascension Sunday. It has been 40 days since the glorious resurrection of Jesus, and on this day, we commemorate His ascension into heaven. As Ash Wednesday consistently falls on a Wednesday, Ascension Day falls on a Thursday, and we had it on May 18 in the year 2023. The ascension of Jesus into heaven symbolizes His complete unity with God, affirming His divine nature as the Son of God.

In contrast to Jesus' departure to the heavenly realm, my father made the journey to where I reside during my vacation. He expressed a desire to embark on a tour of the southern United States alongside me. During this memorable time, we first explored the areas of Dallas, Houston, and New Orleans before boarding a flight to Miami. Our adventures continued as we ventured through Miami, Key West, and finally arrived in Orlando. It was an incredible opportunity for me as well, as I had never visited these regions before. However, one notable challenge arose—I had to drive to all these locations by myself. Over the course of approximately 10 days, I covered a distance of over 1500 miles behind the wheel.

My dad tried to stay awake to prevent me from sleeping, but sometimes he would fall asleep next to me. While my dad slept, I found myself reminiscing about my childhood when we used to travel long distances in my dad's car. As a curious boy, I had a tendency to ask a lot of questions to adults, and my inquiries usually began with "Why?" However, during those lengthy journeys, one question that I repeatedly asked was, "Are we almost there yet?" Unlike today's kids who have electronic devices and can watch an animation on YouTube in the car, I would have to endure boredom in the cramped space. It was a source of mild frustration when I woke up after a nap only to realize that we hadn't reached our destination. So, after a while, I would ask the same question again, and then again. Nevertheless, my parents were patient and always responded kindly.

The question posed by Jesus' disciples in today's passage is similar to that of a child asking if they are almost at their destination during a journey. Just like mischievous children who become bored and impatient after traveling a distance that exceeds their understanding, the disciples seek a quick answer from Jesus. Jesus gathers his disciples in Bethany, located at the eastern base of the Mount of Olives (Acts 1:12; Luke 24:50).

They listen attentively to his final words of instruction, which should have included the Great Commission mentioned in Matthew 28: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:18b-20).

The immediate response of the disciples to the Great Commission was likely the question we find in today’s text: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6) This question reveals that the disciples had not yet fully let go of their previous way of thinking. Since their initial encounter with Jesus in Galilee and throughout the three years of following him, they held the belief that Jesus, the Messiah, would “restore the kingdom to Israel.”

When we examine the history and circumstances of Israel leading up to the arrival of Jesus, we can better comprehend why they had been eagerly anticipating a Messiah who would liberate them from their oppression and challenges. Firstly, Israel had been subjected to the rule of various empires, which added to their longing for deliverance. Additionally, they had experienced a prolonged period of spiritual drought, with no divine revelation for approximately 400 years between the last two Old Testament prophets, Malachi and John the Baptist. Thus, upon encountering Jesus, the people of Israel envisioned him as a political leader akin to King David, who would restore Israel to its former strength as a nation. It is important to note that Jesus was a descendant of David, and in the eyes of the disciples, his experiences of persecution and hardship mirrored the trials David faced while evading Saul before ascending to the throne. Consequently, they held the belief that Jesus would eventually assume kingship, and Israel would emerge as the preeminent world power, ruling over all nations.

Their faith was shattered by Jesus’ death, and they fled in fear, completely devastated as their expectations of playing a significant role in his kingdom were crushed. Despair engulfed them, and it seemed as though their journey had reached its unfortunate end. However, something unimaginable occurred. The women who had visited the tomb returned with astonishing news—the tomb was empty, and Jesus had miraculously appeared among them. His resurrection reignited hope within their hearts. Yet, their focus remained distant from that of our Lord. They continued to pose childlike questions, asking, “Are we almost there yet?”

Then our Lord, Christ, responded to them, saying, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority.” In this statement, Jesus redirects their focus and broadens their perspective beyond their immediate expectations. Similarly, like the disciples, we often find ourselves consumed by our personal desires and expectations. We may strive for success, recognition, or material possessions, inadvertently neglecting the greater purpose for which we have been called.

However, Jesus challenges us to look beyond our immediate circumstances and desires. When we become preoccupied with earthly values, Jesus reminds us, saying, “It is not for you!” When we are influenced by uncertain situations and yearn to know our future and outcomes, Jesus again says, “It is not for you!” Instead, Jesus invites us to embrace the Great Commission He has for us. He calls us to shift our focus from the temporal and to wholeheartedly embrace His greater purpose.

Jesus, our Lord, bestowed the Great Commission upon them, motivating them to go forth and make disciples of all nations. And He promises the coming of the Holy Spirit, urging them to make the decision to follow Him and live according to His purpose. It is both for them and for us!

Jesus assures His disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. This promise of power is not to exalt themselves or to pursue personal gain, but rather to equip them for their mission. This power is meant to enable them to be effective witnesses, testifying to the life-transforming message of the Gospel.

In our lives, we too have been given the promise of power through the Holy Spirit. This power enables us to be bold and courageous, overcoming fear and doubt as we fulfill our calling. It empowers us to be faithful witnesses of Christ’s love and grace, reaching out to a world desperately in need of hope and salvation. As Jesus declares in today’s text, these powers have already been promised to us. When we eagerly anticipate them with faith and make use of them, they undoubtedly work within us. This is because, as we are all aware, the Holy Spirit has already come to us and resides within us.

In response to Jesus’ parting instructions, the disciples assembled in the upper room and devoted themselves to prayer. They understood the importance of prayer as a means to seek God’s guidance, strength, and unity. It was during this period of waiting and preparation that they wholeheartedly embraced the Great Commission.

As Christians within the Wesleyan tradition, today holds another significant meaning for us. It is known as Aldersgate Sunday, which commemorates a pivotal moment in the life of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism. On May 24, 1738, John Wesley attended a gathering at Aldersgate Street in London. During this meeting, while someone read Martin Luther's preface to the Book of Romans, Wesley underwent a profound spiritual awakening. He described this experience as his heart being "strangely warmed." This transformative encounter deepened his faith and granted him a greater understanding of God's grace.

Even prior to the Aldersgate experience, Wesley was a devout Christian who diligently studied the Bible, engaged in regular prayer, and served others. However, the event marked a turning point for him as the Holy Spirit empowered him with the same divine power promised to all believers by Jesus. It solidified his personal commitment to his faith and ignited an intense desire to share the message of God's grace and salvation with others as Jesus says. Wesley began preaching with increased boldness, emphasizing the significance of personal conversion and communal support, while advocating for a practical and disciplined approach to spiritual life.

Similarly, we are called to embrace the Great Commission given to us by our Lord. It requires us to surrender our lives fully to the Triune God, seeking Divine guidance and direction in all that we do. We recognize that our faith journey involves more than mere adherence to religious practices. As we can see in Wesley's example, the mission of God is always fulfilled only through God's grace and empowerment. In our surrender, we acknowledge our limitations and humbly seek the intervention and empowerment of the Triune God. We strive to align our hearts, minds, and actions with God's will, recognizing that true transformation and fulfillment come from Divine grace working within us.

Cheltenham folks! As we commemorate Ascension Sunday and Aldersgate Sunday, let us reflect on the command entrusted to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. May we release our limited expectations and embrace the magnificent vision He has for our lives. Following in the footsteps of John Wesley, let us open ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit, which equips us to be faithful witnesses in the world. And may we wholeheartedly commit to prayer, seeking God's guidance and strength as we fulfill the purpose of the Holy Trinity, the Great Commission. May the Lord bless us and empower us to live out our missions for God's glory. Amen.