

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

*The Great Commission and
God's Unfolding Plan
for the Nations*

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REFORMED
FORUM

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PREFACE

ON A BEAUTIFUL spring day, March 5, 2024, Reformed Forum hosted a pre-conference event ahead of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary's annual spring theology conference. This booklet contains the address I delivered at the event, held at the seminary in Taylors, South Carolina. Dr. James J. Cassidy, Dr. L. Anthony Curto, and I presented on distinct facets of the Great Commission.

These addresses were crafted to explore distinct aspects of Christ's command. My contribution focused on the charge to go to the nations, an exploration of the historical and ongoing missionary call of the church. Dr. Cassidy expounded on the function of the ordinary means of grace in missions, with a particular emphasis on the central role of preaching. Dr. Curto addressed the imperative to teach, demonstrating how instruction is integral to the discipling process commanded in the Great Commission.

In an age when the essence of the Great Commission is often obscured by this-worldly cultural pursuits, we aimed to re-

calibrate the church's focus on the explicit command of Christ and to underscore the biblically prescribed means by which we are to undertake this paramount task.

My hope is that these pages will contribute to a greater understanding of the church's call to make disciples of all nations, as we continue to labor for the advancement of God's kingdom. As you engage with the material presented, may you find encouragement and a renewed enthusiasm for this high calling.

Camden M. Bucey
March 2024

INTRODUCTION

PRESBYTERIANS TRACE THEIR theological and ecclesiastical roots back to Scotland. The nineteenth century in Scotland was a golden age of missions, wherein emboldened believers sought to bring the truths of the Reformation to the world according to the Great Commission.

One important chapter of Presbyterian missions occurred in the parish of Kilsyth, where a powerful vision for the nations was born. Here, William C. Burns, a child of Scotland, would inherit a legacy of faith that propelled him far beyond the confines of his homeland, to the distant lands of Manchuria—contemporary northeast China and inner Mongolia.¹

1. “Wm. H. Burns ministered for fifty-nine years, commencing in 1800, and in his long pastorate at Kilsyth he saw a great spiritual harvest such as James Robe had witnessed in the same place in the 1740’s. It was his son, William C. Burns, who died in far-off Nieu-chwang in 1868, one of the most outstanding of all the first missionaries to China’s millions. The work done in parishes like Ferintosh and Kilsyth moulded the men who were to be the leaders of Scottish missionary endeavour.” Iain Hamish Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh ; Car-

His final resting place, marked as “the advanced post of Christian conquests,”² serves as a testament to the enduring spirit of the Great Commission that has compelled generations of believers. This spirit, deeply rooted in “the Puritan hope” so heartily captured by Iain Murray in his classic book of that title,³ was not confined to the shores of Britain but extended its reach to the ends of the earth through the faithful labor of Scottish missionaries. Alexander Duff, speaking with fervor in 1854, echoed this sentiment, challenging the church to grasp the promises of God with a faith that could move mountains, believing that even the most formidable bastions of idolatry could be brought low before the gospel.⁴ William Carey delivered a similar clarion call to the church, urging believers to “expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.”⁵

The Great Commission

In these pre-conference sessions, we intend to focus not merely upon the general subject of missions, but upon the Great Commission—our Lord’s mandate to the church, which directs our mission unto his glorious return. As we engage this topic, let us remember the legacy of these missionaries, who dared to envision a world transformed by the power of the gospel. Their stories remind us that we are part of a continuum

lisle, Pa. : Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 164.

2. Murray, 157.

3. Murray, *The Puritan Hope*.

4. Alexander Duff, *Speech of the Rev. Dr. Duff, on Foreign Missions and America, Delivered in the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, on the Evening of May 29, 1854* (Edinburgh: J. Greig, & Son, 1854), 19; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 158.

5. Iain Murray quoting William Carey, who was summarizing Isaiah 54:2–3. Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 140.

of faith, called to engage in the same mission, standing on the same promises of our Lord.

And Jesus came and said to them, “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, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18–20).

This is a word given to the church upon the resurrection of our Lord, yet it is a command in service of the fulfillment of God’s covenantal purpose which he established in the beginning. With that in mind, what does it mean to “go and make disciples of all nations?” To answer this question with the depth it deserves, we must place it within the sweeping storyline of the Bible—from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem. This is not merely a New Testament injunction but the climactic mandate of a covenant history that stretches back to creation itself.

In the Scriptures, we see a God who is neither distant nor disinterested but one who actively pursues his people, confirming his promises through covenants. From God’s original offer to Adam in the covenant of works and then his promise of the seed of the woman after Adam fell in sin, to the covenant with Abraham, promising that through his seed all nations of the earth would be blessed, to the new covenant in Christ’s blood, God has been unfolding his plan to redeem a people for himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation. This grand narrative of God’s covenantal dealings forms the backbone of our exploration. And it is in this narrative that the Great Commission finds its rightful place as the capstone of God’s

redemptive plan.

A Vision of the Guaranteed Future and the End of Missions

The prophet Isaiah gives us a vision of the future when God's purposes for the nations will finally be realized.

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any-more (Isa. 2:2-4).⁶

God's holy presence often rested on mountains—whether Mt. Ararat (Gen. 8:4), Moriah (Gen. 22), Sinai (Ex. 19–Num. 10), and even Eden (Ezek. 28:13–15). But of all these mountains, Mt. Zion was the place where God put his name (1 Kings 11:36; 14:21; 2 Kings 21:4).⁷ And the Spirit's work is not complete until Mt. Zion is the exclusive location of worship.

In his vision, Isaiah sees the Lord reigning from Mt. Zion in the New Heavens and New Earth (see also Isa. 65:17–25).

6. See also Micah 4:1–4.

7. See T. Desmond Alexander, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 589.

On that day, the house of the Lord will be established as the highest of the mountains. It will be the place of preeminence over the whole earth. The Lord will conquer his enemies, and Mt. Zion will be the clear location of the true king. All other mountains will be made low (Isa. 40:4), and worship from all peoples will be at the mountain of the Lord rather than the mountains of pagan gods.⁸ All of God's people will have been reconciled into one new man (Eph. 2:11–15), because all of God's people—whether Jew or Gentile—will have been grafted into Christ.⁹

This is a vision of the guaranteed future and the end of missions. It is the end in the sense that all the elect will be called into God's house and they will all know him. We will have no further need to evangelize. Yet, it is also the end in that this is the purpose and goal for which we engage in missions. It is the reason for missions in the first place. Now that we know the ending, let us consider in greater detail how this plan and purpose unfolds throughout redemptive history and the beginning of the nations in the Old Testament.

8. See especially Mic. 4:1–2; cf. Isa. 2:2–3; 4:1–5; 25:6–26:2; Ezek. 40–48; Rev. 21:9–10; G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 1151.

9. See Eph. 1:22; 2:20; 5:23; 1 Pet. 2:6; Isa. 28:16; Col. 1:18.

OLD TESTAMENT

ANTICIPATION

The Descendants of Noah and the Tower of Babel

In the aftermath of the flood, Genesis 9:18–19 introduces us to a seminal moment in redemptive history: “The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. . . . From these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.” This brief passage marks the inception of the nations, setting the stage for understanding how God’s redemptive plan would unfold through diverse peoples and cultures. The lineage of Japheth is of particular interest for our study.

Japheth’s descendants, listed in Genesis 10:2–5, are traditionally understood to have spread into the regions that would become Europe and parts of Asia. This expansion is not merely an historical or geographical note but carries profound theological significance. The dispersion of Japheth’s de-

scendants symbolizes the early formation of Gentile nations, which would later become pivotal in the narrative of Scripture as it unfolds to reveal the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's salvific plan. The blessing pronounced by Noah on Japheth in Genesis 9:27, "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem," hints at a future integration and blessing of the Gentile peoples with the lineage of Shem—the line through which Abraham and, ultimately, Christ would come. This intermingling of blessings forecasts the gospel's reach beyond the boundaries of Israel to the entire world.

This providential widening of blessings, however, encounters a pivotal moment in the Tower of Babel narrative found in Genesis 11:1–9. Humanity, speaking a single language, sought to make a name for themselves by building a city and a tower reaching to the heavens. This act of hubris, aiming to unify humanity apart from God, led to a divine intervention by which God confounded their language, resulting in the scattering of peoples across the earth. Babel stands as an example of human sinfulness—our tendency to seek autonomy from God and unity on our terms, which ultimately leads to division and dispersal.

The Abrahamic Covenant

Immediately after this account of rebellion in Genesis 11 comes the genealogy of Shem, which leads to the figure of Abram.

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a

blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:1–3).

This covenant is not a mere footnote in biblical history but a foundation upon which much of God’s subsequent dealings with his people are built. It sets the trajectory for God’s redemptive plan, which culminates in the person and work of Jesus Christ and continues through the church’s obedience to the Great Commission. When God calls Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, he is essentially inaugurating the next chapter in redemptive history, one that will carry significant implications for the nations—or, as the promise puts it, “all the families of the earth.”

Israel as a Light to the Nations

While the promise focuses on the descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, Scripture makes it increasingly clear that God’s covenant promises were never intended solely for a particular ethnic or geographical community. From the very beginning, these promises had a universal scope, aimed at bringing blessing to all the families of the earth. We see this developed in multiple ways throughout Isaiah’s prophecy.

Take, for instance, Isaiah 42:6–7, in which the Servant of the Lord is commissioned not merely to be a blessing to Israel but to act as a “light for the nations.” This Servant is given the divine task to “open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” This theme is amplified in Isaiah 49:6, where God declares that it is “too light a thing” for the Servant only to restore Israel. Instead, his mission is to be a light to the

nations so that God's "salvation may reach to the end of the earth." This global vision anticipates the Great Commission, in which God commands us to make disciples of all nations, echoing the divine intent to bring salvation to the far reaches of the globe.

Later, in Isaiah 60:1–3 Israel is called to "Arise, shine, for your light has come," a light so compelling that it draws "nations" and "kings" to its brightness. Though Israel often faltered in its charge, the promise remained, finding its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ—the true Israel and the Light of the World. The church is now commissioned to reflect this light, drawing people from every tribe, tongue, and nation to the brilliance of the gospel.

As the prophetic voice of Isaiah casts a vision of the Abrahamic promises reaching their fulfillment, we find ourselves on the precipice of a critical juncture. The mission, grounded firmly in the covenant promises of God, anticipates a glorious future where the knowledge of the Lord permeates the world as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9). This eschatological vision, brimming with hope, prepares us for the pivotal moment in the history of salvation—the incarnation of the promised Messiah.

NEW TESTAMENT

FULFILLMENT

The Coming of the Messiah

The transition from the Old to the New Testament is more than a turn of the page; it is the dawning of a new era in God's redemptive narrative. In this epoch, the "fullness of time" heralded by the prophets is realized (Gal. 4:4). God's sovereign timing unfolds with the birth of his Son, a singular event that is both rooted in history and eternal in significance.

This coming is the fulfillment of a lineage of promises, a succession of prophecies, and a series of types, all converging in Christ. His advent is not a detached episode but the axis upon which the whole of redemptive history tilts, affirming every divine utterance as "Yes" and "Amen" in him (2 Cor. 1:20). As we witness this fulfillment, we find ourselves not only as heirs to the promises but as witnesses to the faithfulness of God, whose redemptive work reaches its zenith in the

person and work of Jesus Christ.

Jesus inaugurated a new covenant that would be the means by which God's blessings would reach the ends of the earth. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus fulfilled the law and the prophets, becoming the true Israel, the true Servant, the true Light to the nations. In him, the promises to Abraham and the visions of Isaiah reach their ultimate fulfillment. Through faith in Jesus all nations of the earth are blessed, as people from every tribe and tongue become children of Abraham by faith (Gal. 3:16–29).

This is not an artificial imposition upon the text of the Old Testament. Jesus identified himself with Isaiah's prophecies. When he walked into the synagogue, picked up a scroll, and read from Isaiah 61, he declared Isaiah's prophecy to have been fulfilled that day (Luke 4:16–30). He is the one who will deliver the people from their bondage. In Jesus Christ, then, we see the system of Old Testament promises not merely converging but coming to life. He is the living embodiment of these promises, the one in whom the storylines of covenant history find their resolution. Through him, the particularities of Israel's history are opened up to include people from every nation, fulfilling God's promise to bless all families of the earth.

This is the vision of the end that Isaiah provides. In Isaiah 2:3, many peoples will say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." Those who walk in the way of the Lord arrive at Mt. Zion, coming to worship the king. So great is the Lord's call, that these nations are depicted as streams flowing up the mountain.

And they come to the Lord to be taught. The purpose of the teaching is that they will walk in his paths—that they

would learn from him and obey his commandments. This is deeply aligned with the mission of the church as articulated in the Great Commission—to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. In this mission, the church serves her risen and ascended King, empowered by his Spirit, to bring the light of the gospel to a world enshrouded in darkness.

Christ's earthly ministry, therefore, is not an endpoint but a glorious beginning. It marks the inauguration of the church's mission, fueled by the Spirit working through the Word, to bring Christ's kingdom to the ends of the earth. This new age of Spirit-enabled mission breaks forth at Pentecost.

The Apostolic Mission

The Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 marks the gathering of the nations through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Jerusalem was filled with devout Jews “from every nation under heaven.” When the Holy Spirit descended on the people, they each began to speak in other tongues and were enabled to hear the gospel each in their own language. This miraculous event signifies the reversal of Babel's curse. Pentecost demonstrates that the unity God desires is not found in human achievement or uniformity but in the Spirit-filled proclamation of Jesus Christ, reconciling us to him and to each other in righteousness and holiness.

From Babel's scattering to Pentecost's gathering, Scripture reveals God's masterful plan to redeem a fractured humanity, uniting us not through human effort but through the transformative power of the gospel. With the ascension of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Apostles were

thrust into a new phase of God's covenantal plan. Empowered by the Spirit, these ordinary men were tasked with an extraordinary mission: to be Christ's witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Pentecost is a foretaste of the new heavens and the new earth, where people from every tribe, tongue, and nation will worship the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

The Apostolic Mission in Acts and the Pauline Epistles

As the Apostles and other early believers spread out from Jerusalem, we see them wrestling with how to apply the Old Testament Scriptures and Jesus' teachings in new contexts. The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 serves as a pivotal moment in this regard. The Apostles and elders gathered to discuss the issue of Gentile inclusion, ultimately affirming that Gentiles are not bound by the Mosaic law in order to be part of God's covenant community. This decision reflects a nuanced understanding of redemptive history, recognizing that the gospel is not bound by ethnic or cultural barriers.

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, is particularly concerned with the proper articulation and application of the gospel in diverse settings. Whether he was addressing the legalism of the Galatians or the licentiousness of the Corinthians, Paul consistently grounded his arguments in the redemptive work of Christ and the overarching story of God's covenantal promises. One of Paul's recurring themes is the "mystery" that has now been revealed—namely, that Gentiles are fellow heirs in the same body of Christ (Eph. 3:6).

Paul was called to bring the gospel to the Gentile world, effectively serving as the primary instrument through which

the descendants of Japheth were invited to dwell in the spiritual tents of Shem. In Romans 9–11, Paul articulates God’s purpose in electing Israel and his sovereign plan to include the Gentiles in his redemptive purposes. This is seen specifically in Romans 11:11–24, where he employs the metaphor of an olive tree, illustrating how Gentiles have been grafted into the covenantal blessings initially given to Israel. This inclusion is not a replacement but an enlargement, reflecting the prophecy concerning Japheth and the expansive grace of God that reaches beyond ethnic and national boundaries.

This reminds us that God’s plan for salvation was always designed to encompass all nations, pointing to the fulfillment of this plan in Christ Jesus. The church today is commissioned to continue extending the reach of the gospel to the ends of the earth, inviting all peoples to find their place in God’s house, under the lordship of Christ. Just as Japheth’s descendants were foreknown to dwell in the tents of Shem, so now, through Christ, all are invited to dwell in the presence of God, participating in the blessings of the covenant and our eternal inheritance.

This is the vision of the future we saw in Isaiah 2. What a glorious day that will be! While we do wait for this future day, we enjoy this already in anticipation. Hebrews 12 declares that, “you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. . .”

CONCLUSION

FROM THE PROMISE to Abraham that in him all families of the earth would be blessed, to Isaiah's vision of the nations streaming to Christ on the heavenly Mt. Zion, we see a God who is steadfast in his commitment to redeem a people for himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation. As it did for the ancient church, this continuity in God's redemptive plan ought to inform and inspire our own Reformed and Presbyterian congregations today even as it did our forefathers in Scotland. The seeds sown by William C. Burns and his fellow missionaries continue to bear fruit from Kilsyth to China. Their lives, marked by an unwavering commitment to the gospel, remind us that the call to missions is not a relic of the past but a living, breathing mandate for the church today. On this note, Alexander Duff's impassioned plea to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland rings as true today as it did in 1854.

Oh, what promises are ours, if we had only faith to grasp

them! What a promise is that in the great commission — Go and do so, and lo I am with you, even to the end of the world! We go forth amongst the hundreds of millions of the nations, we find gigantic systems of idolatry and superstition consolidated for 3,000 years, heaped up and multiplied for ages upon ages, until they tower as high mountains, mightier than the Himalaya. . . . But what does faith say? Believe and it shall be. And if any Church on earth can realize that faith, to that Church will the honour belong of evangelizing the nations, and bringing down the mountains.¹⁰

The legacy of these Scottish missionaries challenges us to look beyond our immediate context and consider our role in God's global mission. Let us carry forward the torch of faith, inspired by those who have gone before us. In this grand narrative, we are not mere spectators but active participants, striving with all his energy until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea (Isa. 11:9). May we, too, be emboldened by the Spirit, and continue the work of the Great Commission in our generation.

10. Duff, *Speech of the Rev. Dr. Duff, on Foreign Missions and America, Delivered in the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, on the Evening of May 29, 1854*, 19; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 158.