**Did The Great Commission Apply To The Apostles Only?**

More and more frequently I am hearing Christians preaching the commission Jesus gave in Matthew 28:19-20 and Mark 16:15-16 to teach the gospel to the world was only for the apostles, and not for all Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth.

We can see that fact right in Matt 28:19-20 itself. It is true this commission was initially addressed to the apostles, but inherent in the commission is that this assignment is to be passed on to all who are baptized. And that gets us Christians today, doesn’t it? Jesus told the apostles in verse 19 to go teach all nations, and then baptize those that accept their teaching. In verse 20, Jesus explicitly instructs that the ones converted are to be taught “to observe all things whatsoever” he had commanded the apostles. Naturally that would refer to (among other things) the commandment Jesus had just previously given to the apostles, that is, to teach all nations. So Jesus also directed every convert to play a role in teaching all nations, not just the apostles. That should conclusively settle this question.

Just because we are not responsible to do everything the apostles did, that wouldn’t prove any particular requirement is not binding on us, would it? If so, that would mean none of the commands to the apostles apply to us - which flatly contradicts Matt 28:20. Shouldn’t the correct understanding of verse 20 be that everything the apostles were commanded to do, so are we commanded, except those things that can be proven to be specific to the apostles’ work (and not a Christian’s work)? If yes, then an admission that other Christians should preach also would close the loop on this argument, right? How about Acts 8:1,4 for that proof? I Pet 2:21 teaches we should follow Jesus’ example. There are some things we can’t follow Jesus’ example on (like raising the dead), but would we conclude from that we don’t have to follow the example of Jesus found right in the immediate context (be willing to suffer for God)? If not, why would one reason that exact same way regarding Matt 28:20?

Besides teaching, Jesus was commissioning baptism here. And more than just the apostles (then and now) baptize, therefore it becomes obvious the great commission applies to more than just the apostles (then and now).

The expression at the end of verse 20, “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world,” is Jesus’ assurance that he would be with those carrying out this great commission until the end of the world. But that doesn’t make any sense if Jesus is only talking about the apostles in their lifetimes. They are long since dead and gone, but this passage comforts us to know that Jesus is with us even today as we do our best to fulfill His commission to preach the gospel to the lost. Again, all of this is made clear by Matt 28:19-20.

Some object saying it is impossible for every Christian to go to every nook and cranny of every nation. First, we should never appeal to the consequences of a Biblical statement to accept or reject said statement. If each and every Christian is required to go to every nation, then we all better get busy doing that. But that is not what Matt 28:19-20 was saying, not even then to the apostles. It wasn’t even the responsibility of each and every apostle to go to every nation; instead, Jesus gave that responsibility to the apostles as a whole. Actually He gave that responsibility to the apostles and all other Christians at that time as a whole. Most likely the eunuch of Acts 8:28 was the first Christian to take the gospel Ethiopia, and he wasn’t an apostle. Within a few years of when the church first started, there were probably tens of thousands of disciples. The great commission was for all those thousands of disciples (perhaps led by the apostles) to each do his or her part in getting the gospel to every nook and cranny of the world. We can read that was accomplished by all the Christians as a whole (not just the twelve) by the time Col 1:23 was written.

And we see this fact in how the great commission was carried out in the first century. It wasn’t just the apostles who felt the need to evangelize; it was each and every Christian:

* I Pet 3:15 Christians (not just “apostles”) are to “give an answer to every man”
* Jude 1-3 all that are “sanctified” are to “earnestly contend for the faith”
* Heb 5:12 “when for the time ye ought to be teachers” – not just the apostles

When the apostle Paul was sent out on one of his missionary journeys in Acts 13:2, Barnabas went with him. It would be strange to say Paul was carrying out the great commission but Barnabas wasn’t - considering they were doing the exact same work, and that together. That would about like saying only the man of Luke 16:18b was committing adultery, but not the woman he was committing adultery with!

And weren’t the Thessalonian brethren carrying out the same work Paul and Barnabas were doing? You would certainly get that impression from I Thess 1:8 - “For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad ….” Certainly they were fulfilling the great commission of Mark 16:15-16.

And what about Philip in Acts 8:5,12-13, 8:35-38 and Timothy (II Tim 4:2)? Weren’t they teaching and baptizing - just as the great commission directs?

Passages like Phil 4:9 command us to emulate the apostles, and since the apostles were told to go out and try to convert the world - we must do likewise. We certainly understand how Phil 4:9 requires us to follow Acts 20:7 and the first day of the week Lord’s Supper; why don’t we apply the same logic to the apostles’ follow through of Matt 28:19? Consistency demands that these two apostolic examples stand or fall together.

Acts 8:1,4 (all the church “went every where preaching the word”) is also a binding example for all. It proves all Christians (not just the apostles) did what the apostles were commanded to do – preach the gospel everywhere. Are we following that example? If how the great commission was carried out in the book of Acts helps us understand what the purpose for great commission baptism was, why wouldn’t how the great commission was carried out in the book of Acts also help us to understand who was supposed to carry out the great commission? It is the exact same logic, right?

Conclusion: Not only did the Great Commission apply to all Christians in the first century; it applies to each and every Christian today. God’s church as a whole should attempt to carry the gospel to every nation in every generation. That means each and every Christian has a job to do. For some, that means traveling to far-away lands to get the truth out. To others that means trying to convert any person they can make an opportunity with to teach in their area. Let’s get to work and carry out the Great Commission in our life – man, woman, and youth.