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**NOTES ON THE GREAT COMMISSION  
*by Jefferson David Tant***

The various texts containing what is called “The Great Commission” are some of the most familiar texts in the New Testament. These words were Christ’s final charge to his disciples before he ascended to sit on his throne and rule over his spiritual kingdom—the church. Many can recite the texts from memory, and we appreciate the instruction given that the disciples were to take the gospel message “unto all the world.” Indeed, this was done within that first generation. Paul wrote to the Colossian brethren urging them to “continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister” (**Col. 1:23**).

Indeed, the gospel had spread to the known world in one generation. Documents tell of trade routes by sea and land to India, China, Arabia, Africa and Europe in the first century that enabled the disciples to go. We know that on Pentecost people were there from 16 different regions, and by **Acts 8**, owing to the persecution, they went home, and would have helped spread the gospel just by that means, irrespective of the preachers that would have been the first “missionaries.”

But there are other noteworthy things about The Great Commission that we should consider.

**Matthew’s record.**

"Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" **(Matt. 28:19-20**).

(1) “Into the name…” “Into” in the Greek (eis) carries with it the idea of a motion. “a primary preposition; to or into {indicating the point reached or entered} (Strong’s Greek Dictionary). Thus as one comes into the possession of, or under the authority of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it is obvious that this change of relationship takes place at the point of baptism, not before. Therefore, the denominational teaching that salvation takes place before baptism does not agree with what the Bible says. We are “baptized into,” rather than being “in,” and then baptized.

(2) If Christ is not divine, as many claim, how does he have the audacity to put himself on the same level as God? The Jews more than once sought to stone him to death for that very concept. (cf. **John 8:58-59, 10:30-33**). The Jews clearly understood the implications of the things Jesus was saying. So, in this passage, as well as others, Jesus clearly states his divinity. As C. S. Lewis said, Christ is either a lunatic, liar or Lord. All the evidence supports the latter choice.

(3) The definite article “the” precedes all three individuals in **verse 19**. In checking some 19 different translations in four different languages, all translators understood the article belonged there. This is a clear indication that there are three distinct beings represented, as opposed to some who claim that there is only one being in the Godhead who wears different names.  
  
(4) The baptism in Matthew is done or administered by a human. Christ told the *disciples* to do the baptizing. Thus this is not Holy Spirit baptism, as some claim. Only Christ administered Holy Spirit baptism. John the Baptist said of Christ: “I did not recognize Him, but He who sent me to baptize in water said to me, 'He upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining upon Him, this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.'” **(John 1:33**). Just minutes before his ascension, Christ told the disciples: “for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (**Acts 1:8**). In **Matthew 3:11**, John himself revealed this: “As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” This came to pass in **Acts 2:4** on the Day of Pentecost. “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.”  
  
Many are confused about baptism, thinking there are two baptisms in force today—Holy Spirit baptism and water baptism. As a matter of fact, there are some seven baptisms mentioned in the New Testament. They are baptism in the Holy Spirit (**Act 1:8**); John’s baptism (**John 3:23**); baptism unto Moses (**I Cor. 10:2**); the baptism of (Christ’s) suffering (**Matt. 20:22**); the baptism of fire—hell (**Matt. 3:11**); Christ’s own baptism (**Matt. 3:16**); and baptism into Christ for the remission of sins (**Mark 16:16; Gal. 3:27, etc.).**

By the time Paul’s letter to Ephesus was written, there was only one baptism in force. The other six had either passed away, or were yet to come. The one to come would certainly be the baptism of fire—hell. Note Paul’s words to Ephesus.

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (**Eph. 4:4-6).**

What was that “one baptism?” It was the baptism Christ told his disciples to administer in the Great Commission. Notice Mark’s rendition of Christ’s charge. “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned” (**Mark 16:16**).

As Matthew’s record states that baptism is “towards” or “into” the name or possession of Christ, so Mark writes that both belief and baptism precede salvation. This is contrary to what many believe, as they believe faith *and* salvation come before baptism. Thus “He that believes shall be saved, and then shall be baptized.” But that’s *not* what the text says.

There is at least one solution to the problem. My father, Yater Tant (1908-1997) was having a discussion with a woman who claimed that **Mark 16:16** was not in her Bible. My father protested, insisting it was. Whereupon the woman opened her Bible to the passage. Sure enough, it was *not* in her Bible. She had taken scissors and *cut it out!* Problem solved! Or so she thought. I remember Christ saying, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (**Matt. 24:35**). Christ’s word is more powerful than any pair of scissors.

(5) Christ urged his disciples to make disciples, baptize them, and then “teach them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20). The only way Christ would be with his disciples and those who have been taught the message through the ages is for them all to “observe” what he taught.  
  
The baptism Jesus taught was an immersion in water. One obvious evidence of this is the actual meaning of the word “baptism” in the language of the New Testament—Greek. “baptidzo -- from a derivative of 911; to immerse, submerge; to make whelmed (i.e. fully wet); used only (in the New Testament) of ceremonial ablution, especially (technically) of the ordinance of Christian baptism:--Baptist, baptize, wash” (Strong’s Greek Dictionary).

All scholars from different backgrounds admit this is the meaning of the word, and have confirmed that history records this as the practice of the early church.

Notice the texts that confirm this. “After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water..” (Matt. 3:16). “And John also was baptizing in Aenon near to Salim, because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized” (**John 3:23**). With respect to Philip teaching the Ethiopian, the record states

As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, ‘Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?’ And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’ And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing” (**Acts 8:36-39**).

We further note the comparison of baptism to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

“Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection” (**Rom. 6:3-5**).

In considering the preceding passages, why did John need “much water,” and why did both Philip and the eunuch “go down into” and then “came up out of the water” if all that had to be done was sprinkle a few drops of water? Then in Romans Paul likened baptism to the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. He said we are buried and then raised to a new life. Does that look like “sprinkling” or “pouring” water, or can we see that the text demands a “burial?”

The truth is, it was hundreds of years after that first century that men changed the practice from immersion in water to sprinkling or pouring.

*A little known (yet documented) fact of history is that the Church of England (1534), the Presbyterian (c.1540), and the Congregational (soon after) churches all practiced immersion for about 100 years, or until the Westminster assembly in 1643. At that time, a number of bishops, seeing how much more convenient sprinkling was, came before Parliament insisting that “the devil of immersion ought to be legislated out of the realm it is so troublesome.”*

*“The Westminster assembly convened July 1, 1643. Very naturally the question was brought before this august body of divines, ‘Shall we continue the practice of immersion or shall we adopt sprinkling instead?’ When it came to a vote, twenty- four voted to continue the ancient and apostolic practice, and twenty-four voted in favor of sprinkling. Dr. Lightfoot was chairman, and it was his duty to give the deciding vote. He cast his vote in favor of sprinkling.”* **(EDINBURGH ENCYCLOPAEDIA, Vol. 3, p 236.)**

*In 1644, Parliament acted upon this, repealing the laws enjoining immersion, enacting in their place laws enjoining sprinkling. Those who were not sprinkled were to be treated as outlaws.*

**Mark’s Account**

“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned” (**Mark 16:16**).

The wording is so simple and clear that one needs help to misunderstand it. But in spite of its clear statement, men have sought to mitigate its meaning through the years. In primary school, we were taught the basics of math—addition and subtraction. We can apply the principle to Mark’s record and see how simple and clear it is.

2+2 = 4 – Likewise belief + baptism = salvation.

In my English class I was taught that “and” is a coordinate conjunction, joining words, phrases or clauses of equal rank. So, 2 and 2 equal 4. Each 2 is equal to the other. In the same way, belief and baptism are of equal rank. Belief and baptism are equal components in salvation.

Some try to get around the simplicity of this by saying that since the passage does not say “he who has disbelieved and has not been baptized shall be condemned.” Therefore, they claim that baptism is not necessary. But if the passage said that, it would put a person in limbo—hanging in the balance with neither salvation nor condemnation.

Suppose the passage reads: “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved and has not been baptized shall be condemned.”

Here are the possibilities. Joe believes but is not baptized, thus he cannot be saved. Garfield does not believe, but is baptized just to play it safe. Now, he cannot be saved, because he does not believe, but cannot be condemned because he has been baptized. It takes both components to be saved, and takes both components to be lost. We can obviously see the fallacy of such reasoning.

Let’s consider an illustration.

He that buys a ticket and gets on the train shall reach his destination, but he that does not buy a ticket shall be left behind.

We don’t have to say, “but he that does not buy a ticket and does not get on the train…” If he doesn’t buy a ticket, it would seem obvious that he is not going to get on the train. Likewise, if a man does not believe in Christ, he isn’t going to be baptized.

Some will argue that baptism is a work, and we are saved without works. Thus many denominational creed books state that we are saved by “faith only.” One serious problem with this belief is that the Bible says it isn’t so. “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (**James 2:24**). The context in James shows that the only kind of faith that is effective is an obedient faith. Not that any good works we can do can merit our salvation, but James says in **verse 26**: “For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”  
  
Allow me to elaborate on that just a bit. Verily, if we are saved without works, then we are saved without faith. How is that so? Jesus said that faith is a work. In a conversation with the people one day, Jesus was asked a question, and he then answered.

“Therefore they said to Him, "What shall we do, so that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent" (**John 6:28-29**).

Consider this. Joe is a carpenter. Does he work? We would all agree that he is engaged in manual labor, working with his hands. Andy is an accountant. Does he work? Certainly he does. He may not be engaged in manual labor, but he works with his brain. He analyzes figures, draws conclusions, and makes a determination with the results of his mental activity.

What is faith? Faith examines evidence, draws conclusions based on the evidence, and then decides on a course of action. That is something we do! Jesus said it is a work, a work approved by God. So, if we are saved without works, then we are saved without faith. Who can believe it?

**Luke’s account.**

“and He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem’” (**Luke 24:46-47**).

It is worth noting that in this passage, “repentance” is mentioned before “forgiveness of sins.” Many claim that we are saved by “faith only,” and thus the moment we come to belief, we are saved. As noted earlier, Mark’s account puts faith and baptism before salvation. And now Luke completes the picture. This repentance is a change of direction rather than simply saying “I’m sorry.” Strong’s Greek Dictionary describes “metanoia” as…(subjectively) compunction (for guilt, including reformation); by implication, reversal (of (another's) decision):--repentance.”

From what we have seen in the Biblical record, faith without repentance is worthless, as well as faith without baptism.

**In conclusion.**

Many want to camp on **John 3:16** and claim that belief is the only condition for our salvation. Many have memorized that beloved passage, which says “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

Yes, faith or belief is mentioned there. But what kind of faith? Only a mental assent, or a working/obedient faith? James has given us the answer. The Great Commission gives us the total picture. When we want to know the will of God, we don’t take just one verse and camp on it. We take all of what God has said about the subject. After all, isn’t that what Jesus told Satan? “It is written, 'MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD'" (**Matt. 4:4**).

If those who love **John 3:16** will read just a bit further in the chapter, they will see the kind of faith Christ means, an *obedient* faith: “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (**John 3:36**). ***--Jefferson David Tant-jdtant3@juno.com***