

The background of the cover is an abstract, textured composition of brushstrokes. The colors are primarily shades of blue, ranging from deep navy to light sky blue, with a central area of bright white and pale yellow. The strokes are dynamic and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is reminiscent of a starburst or a bright light source breaking through a dark, textured medium.

BLINDING LIGHT

The Spirituality and Psychology
of the Missionary Call

Alan B. Pieratt

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Introduction

How is it that some of us feel a sense of personal “oughtness” when thinking about serving as missionaries (or ministers)? That sense links up with our belief that much is going on in the world that is invisible to the naked eye. The book of Judges provides an example when it says, *And the Lord raised up judges to lead* (2:16,18). “Raised up” signifies both that God chose leaders, and that they subsequently developed both the desire and capability to serve.

Far clearer yet as an example was the blinding light that Paul encountered. The risen Christ met and called him to service in one dramatic encounter. That story is surely the prototype of all missionary calls. This book attempts to fill out what happens in the minds and hearts of those who feel Christ’s call, and by doing so, strengthen the resolve of those who find themselves in a similar spiritual and psychological place today.

We will look at the missionary call from two perspectives: God’s and ours. It may seem presumptuous to speak of God’s attitudes, choices, or decisions. But that is why we have the Scriptures. He reveals to us His ways and decisions. In my understanding, God comes first because, well, because He is God. His will is the cause of all things. He is always the Initiator. He imposes His will upon the world, not vice versa. Christ said to the disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Our side consists of the thoughts, emotions, and experiences that we have that impel us to respond. I cover God’s actions in the first three chapters. I treat our side, the human side, in a final three chapters.

Throughout, I have tried to be mindful of this question: What spirit do my words evoke and in what direction do they send? Do they summon to faith, call to repentance, and point to Jesus Christ? Do they encourage our inclinations toward missions and ministry? The answer, I hope, is yes. May this book make both you and me better servants of the King. Teach us, O Lord, to be a blessing, for it takes a lifetime to learn how to do it well.

Alan Pieratt PhD, MNM
 Founder, Children’s Relief International

Chapter 1

Christ Commands

Who is God must be our first question.

What does Christ want of us must be next.⁴

We start with the last words of Christ, known today as the Great Commission. The gospels record four versions, probably indicating that Jesus stated it more than once (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-21). We will use Matthew's version:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go 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 I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

The density of meaning in these words ranks alongside the Ten Commandments or the Lord's Prayer. They have a far-reaching and definitive feel. Let us look at them under five headings:

Therefore, Go

All Authority

All Nations

All Christians

Always With Us

Therefore, Go

Jesus could have said many things in His last words. He could have said: "Thank you, Father, that the task is done." Alternatively, He could have said, "Blessed are you, my disciples, enter into your reward." He could have said, "I am going to smash the Romans, punish the Scribes and Pharisees, and re-establish David's Kingdom." The latter was what the disciples were hoping He would say. Instead, He says, "Go." Much of the work of missions is in the going. Traveling, moving, shipping, passports, visas, airports, itineraries, and hosting short-term teams are a big part. We have to go to them, whomever they are. We cannot expect them to come to us, a fact that is all the more true in a mission that reaches the deeply poor. They have no ability to seek or to come to us, even if they wanted to. We have to take the Gospel to them. Much of our work then is in the going.

All Authority

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."⁵ (Matt. 28:18 ESV). Before His death and resurrection, Christ claimed the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10), to heal (Matt. 10:1), to cast out demons (Luke 9:1), and to give His life or keep it (John 10:18). When Peter cut off the ear of one of those coming to arrest them, Jesus said, *"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"* (Matt. 26:53 ESV). Here Christ claims all authority for the first time. We are to accept His final words because all authority lies behind them. His tone is consistent with His Parables of Judgment in which He sounds like a demanding Lord who has the right to decide whether or not we have justified ourselves before Him, and how we will be recompensed. This command justifies missionary support for it draws all Christians into the task.

All Nations

The disciples asked: “*Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). They had hoped to hear him reply, “*Yes, stay in Israel, for its restoration is about to begin and a glorious new age is about to dawn.*” Instead, they hear a command that does not even have the name of Israel in it. How was it possible that their expectations were so far off? Had they not been listening? Just a few days earlier, Jesus observed that God’s will regarding the end of human history was inscrutable: “*But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone*” (Matt. 24:36). The Father was free to establish His Son as King right there and turn Easter into the Day of Judgment. Or not. Jesus’ command to carry His name to the nations was unexpected. The disciples’ confusion may reflect a change of plans that they could not have foreseen. Whatever the correct answer is, Christ’s command to “Go” is so strong that if it were removed from the New Testament, the ethos of Christianity would shift. Our responsibility toward other nations and religions would be less precise. Take away this command, and the disciples might have remained practicing Jews who followed their Messiah within Old Testament parameters. Christianity might have remained a Jewish sect. Instead, even as Israel is removed from being the exclusive center of God’s attention, so all the nations are now part of His people. The task of the Church is to make it a reality.

While the disciples were still looking toward the clouds, two angels appeared and asked, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky?” (Acts 1:11). Perhaps no more than a minute or two had passed and they were already told to move on. If it were not for these angels, the disciples might have set up a shrine on the mountaintop

and founded the first Church of the Great Commandment on the spot. The angels’ question prompted them, and us, in a different direction.

Some believe that Christ’s second coming will occur when His Great Commission has been completed. As Jesus said, “*This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come*” (Matt. 24:14). In this view, the key to understanding this prophecy is the word, preached. Some have defined this to mean that to fulfill this verse will require that 5% of all ethnic groups convert to Christianity. Alternatively, when 2% of all ethnic groups become evangelical. Achieving either of these percentages on a global scale will end our age.⁷ This reasoning seems arbitrary. We do not know what will trigger God’s decision, but we can be sure that we are not the ones who decide when to usher in the Kingdom.⁸

“All nations” conveys the scope of Christ’s ambition. We cannot leave other people alone with their beliefs. We are to make His name known. Can we not grant other religions the benefit of the doubt? Peter gave his answer a few days later: “*There is no other name... given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Christ’s authority sweeps in everyone: all peoples, cultures, and nations, both Christian and non-Christian, not just now, but at all times.

This exclusivism can seem harsh. However, the flip side of “all nations” is that Christ may sweep in people whom we are not counting on. As the Psalmist wrote, *I count Egypt and Babylon among those who know me; behold Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia. In Zion were they born. Of Zion it shall be said, ‘Everyone was born in her,’ and the Most High himself shall sustain her. The LORD will record as he enrolls the peoples:*

‘These also were born there’ (Ps. 87: 3-5). The nations in this passage were enemies of Israel, and yet they are counted as sons and daughters. Jesus said, *“Many will come from the east and the west and [dine] in the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 8:11 NIV). During the forty days of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances, we are told that He preached to the spirits of people dead and “in prison” (1 Pet. 3:19). Perhaps “all nations” encompasses multitudes that had little or no chance in this life. The Old Testament tells the story of men and women outside the covenant with Israel, who were, nevertheless, included in it: Melchizedek, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, Hiram, the Queen of Sheba, Naaman, and Cyrus. The New Testament describes the wise men, the Syro-Phoenician woman, and Cornelius as heroes of the faith, even though they were not Israelites. Their presence suggests that God’s concern was always broader than Israel. At a centurion’s house, Peter heard the words: *“In every nation the man who fears [God] and does what is right is welcome to Him”* (Act 10:35).⁹

All who are saved will be saved through Christ. However, we do not know the limits of His saving work.¹⁰ God was pleased to have Abraham blessed by the mysterious Melchizedek, Israel blessed by the pagan priest Balaam, and the captives rescued by the Babylonian King Cyrus. The Church’s dimensions might be greater than what we think. Isaiah wrote, *“From the ends of the earth we hear songs of praise, of glory to the Righteous One”* (24:16 ESV). We do not know God’s will for the billions who live outside of the knowledge of Christ. Christ could condemn them all. However, He could have done that without going through the trouble of the cross.

On the other hand, we do not have to wonder what Christ expects of us. “All nations” sweeps in everyone.¹¹ Our starting point as Christian missionaries is that *there is salvation in Christ alone*. We are to build

a highway for the Lord through the desert of other beliefs (Matt. 3:3). However, as messengers of a gracious God, we are to do it with humility of mind.

All Christians

Some believe that the command to “*Go*,” is only for religious professionals. This has never been the interpretation of the Protestant church. We believe that all hearers of the Word are responsible. We hear the command and recognize that it is spoken to us.

For those of us who serve as missionaries and raise support to do so, Christ’s “*Go*” means that we have the right to ask our fellow believers to support us. Our fellow believers are under this command no less than we. Their participation is expected, if not in going and serving, then in sending. All efforts to raise money for missionary service build on this foundation.

Always With Us

The scene at the giving of the Great Commission ended with a cloud blocking the disciples’ view: *“And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight”* (Acts 1:9). Then abruptly Christ was no longer visible. He is going. He is going. He is gone! He must have known the anxiety His departure would cause because He ends his Great Commission with an assurance: *“And lo, I am with you always”* (Matt. 28:20). His appearances between His resurrection and ascension expressed the same message. He made time for the men and women who had followed Him. He is still around, and He will be around, watching over them, even if in the most invisible and mysterious way.

“*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” is an expression of love. Without that love, we could just as well be followers of Shiva, a god known as fearful but also merciful. Ours is the greater God, so we have love as a stronger motivation. We cannot love in order to achieve something, but we cannot help but achieve something if we love.¹² Love wills to love. The reverse is also true. If we pursue service out of nothing other than a sense of duty, then our work can start to feel like the “management of an eternal working day.”¹³ Better to understand our obedience as imitative of Christ’s generous, loving character.