

## **The Church, the Great Commission and the Presence of Jesus**

***Matthew 28: 20 "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age".***

The first General Assembly of the post-resurrection Church met as appointed, at the designated place. Like all good assemblies ever since, it began with worship. It had no grand Assembly Hall to meet in, and the commissioners were few in number – just eleven of them. Such statistical returns as were available were scarcely exciting, showing at most some 500 members and adherents. Financially, they faced great challenges, not least because they had recently lost their treasurer, and he had been a thief! No wonder the honest clerk of the meeting recorded that some members had their doubts.

***But...*** that first General Assembly continues to affect the lives of millions today. It has changed the face of nations. It has altered the course of history. It has turned the world upside down. And that for two good reasons – *one*, because the first Act of Assembly laid down that the newly consecrated Church would be a Going Church - a disciple-making Church, a World Church.

That Act of Assembly, "The Great Commission", is the fulfilling of God's Covenant with Abraham, "...in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed". It is the charter that identifies what a genuine church *is*. Jesus Christ established a *Missionary* Church. He planted no other kind.

But there is a *second* good reason why that Assembly is ever memorable: And it is this: Jesus Christ was *there*. Declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead - given all authority in heaven and on earth; Jesus was *there* with the eleven apostles. And the brief minutes kept by the Clerk record an amazing addendum to the Great Commission: This Jesus made a promise to his Going Church, that he would *continue to be present* through all the days, months, years, centuries and millennia that would follow. For as long as it takes. No doubt about it: "*Lo!*" "*Surely!*" I am with you always, to the end of the age." The Missionary Church is the Church of Immanuel, God with us. The Son of God has promised to be with her always.

I want to focus on this one lesson: **“The Church of Jesus Christ, engaged in the Great Commission, desperately needs this promised presence of Jesus”**.

We'll consider three questions:

- I. What is this Presence that Jesus promises to the Church?
- II. Why does the Church desperately need this promised presence?
- III. How can we secure and enjoy this presence?

## **I. What is this Presence that Jesus promises to the Church?**

***It is the presence of the same Jesus who lived on earth***, who died, rose again, and ascended into heaven. It is the presence of the Jesus of the Gospels, with the same personality, the same values, the same love – but with an even more awesome power and glory. “He who had been a lamb in his passion became a lion in his resurrection.” (Bernard of Clairvaux). It is the Jesus who was with John on Patmos.

He is not now physically visible to us, but through the Holy Spirit and his mysterious work, we can be sure Jesus is with us. “The Holy Spirit annihilates the distance between the ascended Lord and us” (Calvin). Jesus withdrew from outward sight so that the Spirit might enable believers to know him better than they could when he was bodily on earth, for now he can be with all his people, everywhere, always. And a Spirit-sustained presence can become “internal” in a way that a physical presence cannot; by the Spirit, Jesus can be “in our hearts”, and operate on the feelings, thoughts and decisions of individuals and churches. “The presence of the Spirit is not a poor substitute for the presence of the risen Christ, but a full and glorious form of his presence.” (Edmund Clowney)

In Old Testament times, Elisha’s servant had his eyes “opened”, enabling him to see the invisible presence of the angel host of God, surrounding and out-powering the enemy force that threatened them. In the Exodus, God’s presence

with his covenant community was made visible in the Pillar of fire and cloud. Today, the divine presence is in “the man Christ Jesus”. He feels our sorrows, he has experienced our pain, he has faced our temptations. He is now glorified in heaven, our great High Priest – and he is with his church on earth by the Holy Spirit.

***This presence is also a fruitful, productive presence.***

The Bible has many illustrations for the relationship between Jesus and his Church. All point to something living and intimate that grows and bears fruit. The vine and the branches; the shepherd and the flock; the husband and his wife; the head and the body, the farmer and the crops. Jesus himself said, “I appointed you to go and bear fruit...”.

Henry Martyn, a pioneer missionary to the Islamic world, said “The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions. The nearer we get to him the more intensely missionary we must become.” To put this another way, this presence of Jesus is not a cushion for a laid-back church. Jesus does not provide private comfort-zones for inactive Christians and passive churches. Every branch that does not bear fruit will be cut from the vine, while those that do bear fruit are pruned (Jn 15:2).

Jesus’ ability to bring spiritual growth and fruitfulness into his church is a direct result of his atoning death on the cross. In abject weakness, deprived of the presence of God, he became sin for us, that we might enjoy the strong presence of our God.

The presence of Jesus motivates and leads his people, giving wisdom to plan and strength to go – as he did in the church at Antioch, and to Paul and his companions when called to Macedonia. It is Jesus’ presence that produces results, as in Philippi when “the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to receive what Paul was saying”.

Where Jesus is present with the church, even sufferings become productive – although that may not be felt or understood at the time. Sufferings are not unfortunate incidents that prevent or excuse us from developing as useful churches or individuals. Rather, Jesus is present, lovingly using sufferings to train us - for our own peace and righteousness (Heb 12:11); for the spiritual progress of the whole Christian community (2 Cor 1); and for the deployment of his strength, which is made perfect in our weakness (2 Cor 12). In short,

suffering is one way by which the present Jesus equips the church to fulfil its task.

Through suffering Jesus may draw us closer to himself, as Sandor, an imprisoned pastor, found in communist Romania in the 1950s. Kept in an overcrowded cell, he had longed for time to be alone with Jesus, for deeper prayer and an increase in spiritual usefulness. Then, for helping a weaker fellow prisoner, he was sentenced to a lengthy spell in an underground punishment box, where he could barely sit, with insufferable heat, no sanitation and minimum food and drink. At first he was miserable and confused. Then he remembered his prayer, and realised that Jesus was in there with him - that he had been given two weeks of undisturbed fellowship with Jesus, and ever-after he blessed God for that wonderful cell.

***This presence of Jesus with his church is also a community-developing presence.***

After Pentecost, the first evidence that something new and unique had begun was the spontaneous appearance of a community of love, self-denial and positive, generous holiness. Jesus, present by the Spirit, not only brought individuals to faith and repentance, but joined them together in a society embodying the Sermon on the Mount and the Golden Rule. People began to work in order to give to others, and to speak, not to curse or belittle, but to console and to build up. This was a group no longer arguing about who should be the greatest, but rather "obeying everything Jesus commanded them".

Such a caring, foot-washing community was something new – there was nothing quite like it in Old Testament Israel. Of course, it was not perfect, but it was a visible fruit of Jesus' presence. Onlookers were awed and said, "See how they love one another!"

And here's another characteristic: ***The presence of Jesus in the church gives his people a new, world-wide connection.***

This is central to the change that he effects through the forgiveness of sins. Being convinced of our utter sinfulness

removes all grounds for pride and superiority. The Hebrew of the Hebrews now sees himself as the chief of sinners. All notions of racial, national, class or religious superiority are now absurd and intolerable. All are on the same footing before the cross.

Yet it takes the gracious firmness of a present Jesus to make that new mind-set a reality. Even in the moments before the Ascension, the apostles were thinking of a restored Israelite kingdom. But that soon changed! Jesus replaced their limited dream with a new vision, reaching to "the ends of the earth" – a kingdom where there is neither Jew nor Gentile, but all are one in Christ Jesus

When we speak of "the church", we may be referring to our local congregation, or to our denomination, or we may be referring to Christ's church throughout the world, of which congregations and denominations are but small particles. The church in China is part of "our church"; the church in Mexico is part of "our church!"

Lesslie Newbigin challenged all churches when he wrote, "The church of Christ is a missionary society, a *congregation*, not a *segregation*". In the perspective of the Christ of Pentecost, there is but one church – the church that is built on the foundation of the unchanging Biblical gospel, that teaches obedience to all the commands of Jesus, and that has in view all the nations of the world.

This grand vision of Christ's worldwide presence with a worldwide church emboldens our on-going witness in the teeth of opposition. In Acts 4, after the Sanhedrin warned the apostles to stop proclaiming Jesus, the church met in a house, not with the door locked for fear of the Jews, but in order to pray to the King of kings. They saw, in the light of Psalm 2, how puny earth's rulers really are, when they dare to oppose the mighty Son of God. They knew Jesus was with them, even before the house shook. So the Sanhedrin's threats held no terror for them.

Richard Wurmbrand was another pastor who suffered under the communist regime in Romania. But he, too, came to realise how puny and transitory the most ruthless and arrogant rulers are, compared to Jesus. His favourite prison story was this: When Richard was sent prison, Vasile Lucaciu was one of all-powerful leaders of the Central Committee of the

Communist Party. Later on in Richard's imprisonment, a prison warden came to their cell and began to question the prisoners about why they had been found guilty. "What did *you* do?" "I slandered Vasile Lucaciu". "And you?" "I supported Vasile Lucaciu". "And you?" "I am Vasile Lucaciu". Only Jesus reigns forever.

What is this presence that Jesus promises to his going church? It is, by the Holy Spirit, a mysterious but real, growth-producing, community-building, holiness-developing, preacher-emboldening, world-wide presence of the Jesus who was moved with compassion for the multitudes, who looked at the Rich Young Ruler and loved him, and who prayed that Peter's faith would not fail.

## **II. Why does the Church desperately need this promised presence?**

We need his presence ***because we are already living among "all the nations"***

"All the nations" is not some strange group of people living far away across the sea. The Scots and the English are Gentile nations. Millions of them, and a large number drawn from the rest of the nations, are living within sight of our church buildings. This is the world to which Jesus sent his church. Whether we find ourselves working in China, on holiday in India, or just living where we've always lived, in Cumbernauld or Achiltibuie, we are among "all the nations".

30 years ago Ray Bakke estimated that, around the world, there are two and a half billion non-Christians who live in the shadow of existing churches. And wherever those billions are found, their moral principles and assumptions, their lifestyles and their attitudes to religion are extremely varied, often perplexing, and by no means identical to the old beliefs and practices of Christian Scotland.

The thought of "going" to these peoples to make them disciples of Jesus is daunting, is it not? It raises questions of inadequacy, of fear, and of whether the whole scheme is wise, right, or achievable in our present society. What can we say to our church members, who hesitate in this way?

Well, we must tell them about the Church's Great Commission – the reason for the church's existence. Jesus commands us to go outside the frontiers of Christendom, outside the church's front-door, and make him known to all.

If that sounds daunting, it's because it *is* daunting! After almost 2,000 years, says Newbigin, "that colossal task is still largely ahead of us. The meeting of the gospel with the great non-Christian religions has hardly yet begun." But however daunting the encounter with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc, will be, it takes on a different character if we are assured that Jesus himself has promised to be with us all the days.

The very reason Immanuel died and rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and sent his Holy Spirit to his Church was precisely so that these people, in all their rich diversity and their daunting differentness, would hear the offer of salvation, and be invited and urged and called to believe on him.

Then, too, we desperately need this promised presence, ***because most human societies are instinctively hostile to the Great Commission, and to the churches that seek to carry it through.***

"Christ no sooner picks up his trowel to build his church than men pick up their swords to fight him," wrote Samuel Rutherford. Most human societies are hostile to a Great Commission Church because they find the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ provocative.

Some fear his gospel message will enrage the followers of other religions and cause violence. Some see it as undesirable, something that will bring division into multi-faith communities. Others fear that "conversions" will cause disputes within families where shame is a strong cultural factor.

Some, like the silversmiths of ancient Ephesus, fear it will have negative economic consequences. Others simply think it's wrong, something driven by an intolerance that does not fit in a post-modern society. More self-assured opponents deride it as a Quixotic quest, a hopeless waste of time and effort whose practitioners, in this day and age, need to be

pitied, and even protected from themselves!

Now there are two things to say to all this hostility:

Firstly, that these negative attitudes were not unknown to Jesus as he gave the Great Commission.

It is not possible, with any sort of academic honesty, to evade or cancel the Great Commission by saying that Jesus knew nothing of a pluralist society.

Pluralism and syncretism were dominant in Israel through much of the Old Testament period, and provoked much conflict with God's faithful prophets.

Pluralism and syncretism were also familiar in New Testament times. In the Roman Empire, according to the historian of its Decline and Fall, "all religions were, for the people, equally true; for the philosophers equally false; and for the government equally useful."

In Judea, the Chief Priest and his colleagues feared that Jesus' uncompromising ministry would provoke a catastrophic war with Rome. Jesus knew how his claims would be viewed, but still asserted, "no one comes to the Father except through me".

Secondly, opposition to the proclamation of the gospel from pluralism is not new here in Britain.

For instance, in 1813 the Charter of the East India Company was being reviewed in Parliament. Up to that date, the Company had refused to allow Christian missionaries to operate within its territories in India. Evangelism was seen as an insult to the ancient Indian cultures, and as a threat to the Company's profits, likely to provoke violence in a society already deeply divided between Muslims, and Hindus. Evangelical Members of Parliament, including William Wilberforce, proposed, despite fierce opposition, that the Charter be amended so that Christian missions would be specifically allowed. Eventually, the decisive vote was won and British India was opened to evangelistic missions. William Wilberforce always declared that "this cause of the recognition of our Christian obligation to British India was the greatest he had lived for, not even excepting the emancipation of the slaves". (See S.P Carey, "William Carey", 1934, p.331)

The arguments Wilberforce combatted in 1813 were substantially those which today are used to oppose all attempts to "convert" people to Christianity, whether they be Jews living in London or remote tribes in the Amazonian rain-forest. It is fashionable among a certain class of present-day "experts" to see the presence of Christian missionaries as a totally negative factor in a world of diverse cultures and religions.

The Great Commission will always be disreputable in the eyes of an unbelieving world, nationally and internationally. Twenty years ago, Harvey Conn wrote that, "Without doubt, the missiological issue of this decade is that of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the Christian understanding of that uniqueness in a world of religious pluralism." It's still the big issue today! So the missionary church urgently needs to put her trust, first and foremost, in the promised presence of our powerful Saviour, even as she defends her conduct and obeys her calling.

Somewhat closer to home, we desperately need this promised presence, ***because churches may themselves be the greatest obstacle to the Great Commission.***

There is a kind of law of spiritual gravity operative in all churches. Left to ourselves, our imperfections and sins will drag us downwards, away from our God-given calling. In some cases whole churches may crash and burn. In all cases churches should be humble and on guard, remembering that judgment begins at the house of God.

A church may become an obstacle to the Great Commission when it abandons the authority of the Bible for the relativism of modern liberalism. When a Church follows public opinion rather than obeying Jesus, it is likely to adopt society's instinctive hostility to the Great Commission, undermining the zeal of Christians and confusing unbelievers.

Other churches side-line the Great Commission almost apologetically, changing their priorities because of financial or manpower pressures. They may decide that it is not the time to attempt any work beyond the maintenance of their own existing congregations.

Others fear that mission activity is impossible until their own members have first been thoroughly taught deep Christian theology. But these are not the priorities of Jesus, and they undermine true mission.

Another obstacle is the spiritual chill that creeps into churches, quenching their first love, and breeding a reluctance to face new challenges, making them self-satisfied like the church at Laodicea. Thomas Chalmers likened some of the preaching of his times to a winter's day: short, clear and cold. "The brevity is good (he said); the clarity is better; the coldness is fatal." Spiritual coldness will render all our ministries and activities counter-productive. "That which does not itself burn can set fire to nothing else" (Gregory the Great).

We always need the presence of the Jesus who makes our hearts burn within us, or we will be a stumbling-block to many.

The church also becomes an obstacle to mission when its life contradicts its message. Mahatma Gandhi once said that all the world would be Christian, if only Christians were not so unlike their Master. Church divisions and squabbles, the lack of a warm, positive, attractive, joyful holiness, the absence of a welcoming fellowship that readily embraces the returning prodigal, all such things are barriers between the gospel of grace and the troubled, lonely outsider. You would never have found Zaccheus, or Mary of Magdala, in such a church!

And if such a church is *my* church, and if it is *I* that am so unlike my Saviour, then I need the presence of Jesus, by the Spirit who convicts of sin and kills sin in me.

To clear such obstacles, revival is needed. What do we mean by "revival" but the return of Christ to where his presence has been lost by lukewarmness, muddled thinking, unrepented sin, or the tolerance of false doctrine? We pray for revival in all churches, including our own, so that our hearts will burn within us, and we will see the world through Jesus' eyes and the world will see Jesus in the churches.

Faced with this vast task of mission, the opposition of society, and our own inherent failings in love and obedience, the presence of our invincible Saviour is a non-negotiable essential. We must pray as Moses did at Sinai, *"If your presence does not go with us, then do not carry us up from here."* Our entire obedience to the Great Commission is dependent on the love and joy that a present, sin-forgiving Jesus brings. The joy of the Lord is our strength.

### **III. How can we secure and enjoy this presence of Jesus?**

#### ***We must be churches that delight in the Word of God.***

The Great Commission tells us to introduce people to Jesus and to teach them to obey him. Jesus has promised to be with a preaching church – a teaching church: *"make disciples, baptising them, teaching them."* The subject of our teaching is Jesus Christ and him crucified. We must teach the Bible and the Jesus who stands revealed in the Bible, for we have no other authoritative source.

This task is always urgent, for as John Chrysostom said some 1600 years ago, "The one great cause of all evils is ignorance of Scripture". In our present age that ignorance is palpable.

The syllabus of our teaching must be the whole Bible, including the Old Testament as well as the Gospels and the Epistles, for the whole Bible is full of Jesus. Calvin says of the Old Testament, "there is not a word or a syllable that does not point to Him." And the whole Bible, in the divine and supernatural light of the mind-opening Holy Spirit, is delightfully suited to make people wise and strong in the Lord Jesus.

Delighting in the Bible involves "unlearning" as well as learning. The Sermon on the Mount rejected the prevailing wisdom of Jewish society: "You have heard it said ....., but I tell you..." The people we teach, whether newcomers, converts, our own children, or our long-term adult members, are daily hearing the values, assumptions and theories of a non-Christian society. Our teaching has constantly to include: "You've heard this on-line, and on your TV, ... but the Bible says...".

Our people – all of us – need to daily delight in the Bible’s teachings, or we will be swept downstream on the powerful current of unbelief.

The Bible can teach members of the “I did it my way” society to sing instead, “O how I love your law”;

those of a “You want it, you’ve got it” society to see that “there is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death”;

those schooled in total self-confidence to quietly repeat, “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see.”

The delightful Bible must be taught delightfully. To do that, Christian parents, Sunday School teachers, small group leaders and elders, as well as of ministers, need to be well-taught themselves, well-trained and well-resourced, and provided with on-going training, “for who can make clear to others that which he himself does not know?” (Lactantius);

In the Internet age, we can access a world of resources, and create our own too, for young and old to use anytime, anywhere. That takes hard work, but “if we would get the treasure, we must not only beg but also dig.” (John Flavel)

The delightful Bible inspires and equips young and old to “go with Jesus”. There is a story that, in the very early days of Apple, Steve Jobs recruited an executive who had only recently started a top job with Pepsi. Jobs could not match the salary, but got his man by asking him, “Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling coloured, sugared water? Or do you want to change the world?”

To secure and enjoy the presence of Jesus, we must delight in the Word of God. As Othlo of Sankt Emmeram wrote almost 1,000 years ago, “It is a basic rule of the Christian life that he who wants to imitate Christ must continually go on learning”

If all that sounds a tall order, then we must remember that the promised presence of Jesus brings into our times of preaching and study the very One who gave a Bible study on the road to Emmaus that caused Cleopas and his friend to exclaim, “Were not our hearts burning within us while... he opened the Scriptures to us?”

To enjoy his presence, as well as delighting in the Word of God, ***we must walk with Jesus in thankful obedience .***

Since Jesus abides where he is loved, loving Jesus is the heart of the Church's life in his presence. So we need to encourage a personal and congregational spirituality, created and sustained by the Spirit of Jesus.

This involves true worship ("I love the Lord!"), joyful obedience to the Bible's commandments (because they are Jesus' commands!), Bible-guided meditation on Jesus, and praying that expresses delight in the presence of Jesus even as it brings our daily needs before him. We must all gaze on the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ

We need to encourage a "fellowship" in our congregations that includes Jesus in our conversations, tells each other how Jesus helped or challenged us in last Sunday's sermons, and encourages us to share our burdens and joys with one another.

Our Prayer Meetings should be big on what has been called "front-line praying" – asking for things that will hurt Satan and break his power over others outside the church – as well as asking Jesus to help us to love and obey him, and become more like him.

True devotion includes individual and collective self-examination, searching our own hearts in the presence of God to see if there is any sinful way in us. That is a call for our Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, and Assemblies to spend time conferring together on the spiritual state of our churches. A church that values the promised presence of Jesus will constantly include on its agenda the question, "Is the Lord with us, or not?"

If he *is* present, how can we recognise it, how can we thank him, and how can we sustain and increase the blessing? But if he is *not* evidently present, should we not be asking whether there is an Achan-like sin in the camp? Have we lost our first love? Have we become luke-warm? And how can we repent and open that door to renewed and revived fellowship with him?

And to enjoy the presence of Jesus, ***we must have hearts that burn with love for all the people of Jesus***

If we are to cherish and develop the presence of Jesus within our churches, we need to be of one mind with him. And, as we've seen, that mind is set upon his one elect people from all nations. Do we have the state of the church and the extent of unbelief around the world in our thoughts? Do we speak and pray about it?

Jesus rejoiced in spirit when the 72 disciples returned, encouraged and joyful from their first experience of mission; Do we draw encouragement, ideas, and stimulus from hearing what Jesus is doing in other parts of his one church – whether that's in Britain or Brazil?

Jesus stands with his suffering people, in a fiery furnace in Babylon, and in a trial before Caesar in Rome; Do we pay attention to reports of the persecution and the sufferings of Christians and pray for them, do we give wisely for their relief and look for ways of visiting them in prison?

There is no lack of resources at every level – here at the Assembly we have leaders of new churches, recently entered our fellowship. And we have delegates from churches and societies far and near. Get to know them. Listen to their stories.

Then there are the awesome resources of the Internet! Our Free Church web-site and the Monthly Record are a good start. We belong to Gospel Partnerships, to Affinity, to the International Council of Reformed Churches and to the World Reformed Fellowship. We work closely with Christian Witness to Israel, and many other mission organisations in the UK and beyond. They – and many others – have useful web-sites. There really is no excuse for ignorance.

It has never been easier to be aware of and to be moved by what Jesus is doing in the world. When, in 1812, William Carey's Bible Translation warehouse burned down in Serampore, devastating nearly 20 years of work, it took 5 months for the news to reach Britain. Five months! – before the churches began praying and people began collecting money to fund the rebuilding. If a fire like that happened in 2016, we could, the same day, be watching on You-tube, skypeing the on-the-spot leaders to find out what the immediate needs were, and how we could help with the re-

building. We could immediately notify our people individually by social media. We could, but would we?

If we want to secure and develop the powerful presence of Jesus with our churches, we need to pray and live as those who have the same, world-wide, mind as Christ.

Here's a final glimpse of such a Christ-minded church:

I once visited a church conference in Liberia, in the immediate aftermath of the dreadful civil war that ravaged the country for years – an inter-tribal war of massacres, of child soldiers and ritual cannibalism and many other horrors. The people talked about their experiences. They told their stories of how Jesus had protected them from death. Just about every person in that group had lost family members in the war; many had watched helplessly as their loved ones were killed by the soldiers of a hostile tribe.

But that was not the purpose of the conference. They were meeting to plan a programme of church-planting – and their burning desire was that the first church they planted should be among the people of that very tribe that had massacred their families. It was a moving experience to hear them speak. It was humbling and inspiring to see the boldness and courage that made them willing to go into territory where their lives would again be at the mercy of those people. And they did. The building where they met did not shake – but it might well have done!

### **To conclude:**

At that first General Assembly, Jesus said "Go and make disciples of all nations... and surely I am with you always, to the end of the age." At this latest General Assembly, just one of the thousands that have followed, can we deny that we, engaged in the Great Commission, desperately need this promised presence of Jesus?

And as we pray and study, and strive for more and more of that presence, even as we commence the work of this Assembly, what better benediction on us than this with which Samuel Rutherford concluded one of his so Christ-filled letters:

***"The love of the lovely Son of God be with you."***