

The Commission (Its Authority and Responsibility)

Dr Irvie Keil Cross

“Authority” is a word disliked by many today—in all realms of life—and it is this disregard for authority that is creating many of today’s problems: both secular and religious.

Baptists, once strong on church authority, have weakened their stand on this issue, and all too frequently today speak more in the tradition of Protestantism than in the historic faith of the Baptists.

Yet it is obvious in our Lord’s command, commonly accepted as “The Great Commission,” that He gave someone authority and responsibility. The only question is to whom this commission and authority was given, for THERE that authority remains until our Lord who gave it returns for an accounting. Let us examine the question honestly from the Scriptures.

There are only three possible recipients of this commission. Either it was given to believers indiscriminately; to the apostles as such; or else it was given to that company of believers our Lord called together during His public ministry which is identified clearly as His church in the book of Acts.

If it was given to the individual believer indiscriminately then it carries no authority, contrary to the example set by John the Baptist and Jesus. If every believer is free to evangelize, baptize and teach, regardless of his identity and belief, then we are left with absolutely no guidelines for truth. It is foolish to say that the Scriptures will be clearly taught in their fulness if the believer is to be left to his every whim in the matter. The mass confusion of Protestantism is evidence enough of this.

Churches have not always been right in their understanding of the Scriptures, but history will witness that congregational study has been far more safe than the edicts, handed down to congregations by self-imposed interpreters. Our Lord was well aware of this when He placed authority for teaching in the hands of the church.

On the other hand if the commission was given to the apostolic office, then it died with that generation for they had no successors—their qualifications prevented that. In choosing a man as an apostle to take Judas’ place it was clearly specified that he must have been a witness of the Lord’s resurrection. **“Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be**

ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.” Acts 1:21-22. It was this condition that caused Paul to say that as an apostle he was **“...one born out of due time”** 1 Corinthians 15:8. Paul had not seen the Lord after His resurrection until He was miraculously revealed to him in his experience of conversion.

The apostles were especially chosen for a period before the New Testament Scriptures were written, and they spoke and wrote as men especially inspired of God. If we are to claim apostolic succession for the clergy in general then we may as well join ourselves to the “chair of St. Peter” and kiss the Pope’s signet ring—a ridiculous idea.

This, therefore, leaves only one logical and Scriptural recipient for the authority vested in the Commission—that company of believers which our Lord called together as His church during His public ministry, and the Scriptures prove this conclusively.

The Commission was delivered on three different occasions, each at a different location. The first, on the day of the Lord’s resurrection, in the city of Jerusalem, and is recorded in Luke 24. (Mark’s account, Mark 16:15, seems to be the same time and place.) The second was sometime later, in Galilee, and is recorded in Matthew 28, and is also referred to by Mark. The final delivery was on the Mount of Olives, and took place at our Lord’s ascension, Acts 1. On each occasion there was clearly present the Lord’s special company of believers. Let us examine them.

In Luke 24 the women from Galilee had come to the sepulcher to anoint the body of Jesus. Upon their arrival, being told by the angels the Lord had risen, Luke 24:9 states **“And returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest.”**, making it quite clear that there was in Jerusalem a group of disciples at that time that included more than the apostles.

Later in the account Jesus meets the two men on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus and makes Himself known to them. Upon this revelation Luke 24:33 states **“And they rose up the same hour, and returned to Jerusalem, and found the eleven gathered together, and them that were with them,”** Here is a company of believers gathered in assembly with the apostles in their midst. The apostles did not assemble alone. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12:28 **“And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.”**, that they were placed in the church, and they were most certainly assembled in church capacity in Jerusalem on this

occasion. The two brethren on the road to Emmaus were familiar with their meeting place and knew where to find them.

It was to this group of disciples meeting with the apostles in church capacity that Jesus appeared in Luke 24:36, and to whom He delivered the Commission in Luke 24:46-48. This company to whom the commission was addressed was none other than the one Peter addressed between the ascension of our Lord and the first Pentecost after His resurrection: a company which he says originated from the baptism of John the Baptist and accompanied with the Lord during His public ministry. If the Lord did not address His Commission to His church on this occasion then there is not a true church in the New Testament.

Even John's brief account of this event, John 20:19-21, agrees with this, stating that **"...the disciples were assembled..."** and when Jesus spoke He spoke to the assembly.

The second time the Commission is delivered it is found in Matthew's account of those events following the Lord's resurrection, chapter 28. The women who came to anoint the body of our Lord were told by the angel at the sepulchre **"And go quickly, and tell his disciples that he is risen from the dead; and, behold, he goeth before you into Galilee; there shall ye see him: lo, I have told you. And they departed quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy; and did run to bring his disciples word."** Matthew 28:7-8. Though the eleven were no doubt included among the disciples here, they are not mentioned, and the command to meet Jesus in Galilee was to the whole company of disciples and in no way limited to the eleven.

On their way to break the news to the group of disciples they met Jesus Himself, and He repeats the angelic instruction to meet Him in Galilee, **"Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid: go tell my brethren that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me."** Matthew 28:10. Again they are instructed to tell the brethren to go to Galilee, and the instruction is in no way limited to the eleven apostles.

Mark, in his account, makes it clear that the Galilee meeting was pre-arranged, before the Lord's crucifixion. He quotes the angel as saying to the women, **"But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you."** Mark 16:7. This indicates that the Lord had made an appointment before His death to meet the brethren in Galilee after His resurrection. In Mark 14:28, after pointing out that the sheep, according to prophecy would be scattered by His crucifixion

experience, Jesus say, **“But after that I am risen, I will go before you into Galilee.”**

Matthew 28:16 states that the eleven went to Galilee to keep this appointment, but there is no indication that they were there with Lord alone. The angel at the sepulchre, and Jesus Himself had sent word to tell the disciples and the brethren to be there, and the language strongly indicates that they were present in sizeable number.

Matthew 28:17 states, **“And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted.”** It is not conceivable that any of the eleven doubted, for they had all their doubts removed in Jerusalem—including Thomas, John 20:26-28. Likewise the company of disciples had had their fears removed in Jerusalem, Luke 24:36-45. It is quite evident, therefore, that the assembly to whom Jesus was about to address the Commission in Galilee had increased to include many who were seeing the Lord after His resurrection for the first time.

Paul, in recounting the witnesses to the Lord’s resurrection, states **“After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.”** 1 Corinthians 15:6. The order in which Paul recounts the witnesses would indicate that the 500 were likely at the Galilee meeting. There is no other event at which such attendance would have been more likely. In Jerusalem the company was limited in assembly for fear of the Jews. Bear in mind that word had been passed along to the brethren that Jesus was going to make an important appearance in Galilee, and they were to be there. Keep also in mind that Jesus’ ministry had been largely in the Galilee area, and therefore many of His disciples lived in that area. This would account for a large gathering there, many of whom were seeing the Lord for the first time after His resurrection—and hence the doubts of some of them. All evidence points to the fact that when the great commission was most fully delivered in Galilee, that, rather than it being a closed meeting with the apostles, it was the largest gathering of the church ever assembled by the Lord’s appointment after the resurrection: a full gathering of that company which began from the Baptism of John the Baptist, and was with Jesus all during His public ministry, Acts 1:21-22. (Indeed, it was here in Galilee that He first began to call out this company, Matthew 4:18-22.) This commission therefore is a CHURCH COMMISSION, and in no way can it be interpreted as an apostolic commission, or having been addressed to the clergy alone.

Our Lord’s final delivery of the Commission is recorded in Acts, chapter 1, and takes place on the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem. Acts 1:4 states that Jesus **“...being assembled together with *them*...”** gave the assembly instructions concerning the interim between His leaving and the coming

baptism of the Holy Spirit. Following this instruction Jesus again addresses the Commission to them.

The group was told to tarry in Jerusalem, Acts 1:4 – which they did, Acts 1:12. It is true that the Record states that the apostles were present, as on other occasions when the church met, but again as on other occasions they were meeting WITH the church—not alone. Peter addressed the group that returned to Jerusalem after receiving the commission, **“And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty,)”** Acts 1:15.

To this assembly He gave the promise of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, Acts 1:5. TO this assembly the angels gave the promise of the Lord’s return, Acts 1:11. This assembly, under the charge of prophecy, elected Judas’ successor to the apostleship, Acts 1:20-26. This company is designated as having originated with John’s baptism and functioned as a company throughout the Lord’s public ministry, Acts 1:21-22. This assembly received the baptism of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost according to promise, Acts 2:1-2. It was to THIS assembly that he 3000 converts were added on that day, Acts 2:41. This assembly continued to grow and is consistently known as a church throughout the book of Acts. It was to THIS assembly that the final commission was delivered, Acts 1:8.

The Commission was the last words uttered by our Lord upon this earth. If the Commission had been an apostolic matter surely He would have made that clear on this occasion. Instead He delivered this final instruction and command to that “called out” company, His church, as on all other occasions. The Great Commission is a CHURCH Commission, and any other seeking to function under its authority is usurping what was never delivered to them.

The Commission and Authority

There is great difference between privilege and authority. While there are many privileges granted to all believers, AUTHORITY to carry out the will of the Lord on earth is clearly placed in the hands of His churches. Let us look at the lines of authority laid down in our Lord’s Commission to His churches.

The Great Commission as given to the churches is really a Commission to evangelize—but the New Testament concept of evangelization is far more inclusive than simply getting people saved. In Matthew’s account, where the Commission is most completely spelled out, the original command is to “disciple all nation,” or to make disciples of all nations.

To get a “profession of faith” is not necessarily to have made a disciple. There are many people in churches today who are not disciples of the Lord. A disciple is a learner. This accounts for the remainder of the Commission.

The order stated is not to make disciples and baptize them and teach them – with an option to leave the latter part of the Commission to someone else. The order is to “disciple,” BY “baptizing” and “teaching.” In other words, a disciple is made of a believer by baptizing and teaching him what Christ has commanded. This is full New Testament evangelism as set forth to the churches.

This is also the order followed by the apostle Paul, especially commissioned to carry the gospel to the Gentiles. He opened his ministry at Antioch (Syria) by teaching there with Barnabas for a whole year the many converts made. He spent a year and a half teaching at Corinth, and two years at Ephesus.

But let us turn to the subject of authority in this matter. We have already established the fact that the Commission was delivered exclusively to the church the Lord called out during His ministry on earth. No religious group can evade any portion of the plain teaching of New Testament Scriptures and call itself a New Testament church, or claim for itself the authority of that Commission.

In Acts 13:46-47 Paul and Barnabas state boldly to the Jews in their synagogue at Antioch (Pisidia), **“Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.”** By what authority had these men preached the gospel “to the Jew first, and also to the Greek”? They were missionaries sent out by the church in Antioch (Syria), Acts 13:1-4, who fully recognised the authority of that congregation by reporting back to them their accomplishments, Acts 14:26-27.

This church authority for the discipling of the nations carries with it church authority in baptism a part of the discipling process, and none who refuse to recognise this authority have any biblical right to tamper with this sacred ordinance. Nowhere in the New Testament, beyond our Lord’s personal presence on earth, will you find a commission to baptize given to anyone, save those to whom it was delivered in the original Commission. Neither can there be found in the New Testament after the giving of the Commission a single

conclusive case where baptism was administered without church authority. Any practise other than this must therefore rest upon assumption or usurpation.

This same principle must of necessity hold true in the teaching aspect of discipleship. Who can obey the words of Jesus “teach them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you,” other than those who accept and observe those teachings themselves? Again, no group sidestepping any New Testament teaching can rightly call itself a New Testament church, or be qualified to teach “all things.” It therefore follows that authority for teaching the observance of all things the Lord commanded is placed upon the shoulders of His churches, which He commissioned to the task before leaving the one (church in Jerusalem) he called out to begin this great task.

Church authority is very real—and not to be ignored.

The Commission and Responsibility

Authority is not an honour—it is a responsibility. The churches of our Lord are not privileged institutions which may stroll through the earth as ecclesiastical prima donnas. Rather, they have an awesome responsibility. They are responsible for the preaching of the gospel to every creature. They are responsible to see that converts to Christ understand the importance of baptism. They are responsible to see that the Scriptures are fully taught in their proper perspective, so that everything receives proper emphasis—that no section is taught to the exclusion of another.

This means that a true church must be constantly alert as to whether it is accepting and practising the full harmony of the Scriptures. It is to these congregations, fully cognizant of their responsibility under the Commission, and to these only, that our Lord promised, “...**I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.**” Matthew 28:20.

Authority cannot be ignored, and responsibility must be constantly recognised—with the fact ever in mind that a day of reckoning is coming. Our Lord wants no “speckled birds” in the presentation of His church to Himself. This fact is rather clearly stated by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:26-27 “**That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.**” Only the constant searching and washing of the Word can accomplish this.