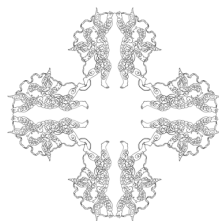


THE
HEART OF
EVANGELISM



JERRAM BARRS

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The Heart of Evangelism

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INTRODUCTION

This book is the fruit of more than thirty years of reflection on what the New Testament teaches us about evangelism; and it is the fruit of more than thirty years of desiring to practice in some poor way what I have learned from that study. One of the concerns that has spurred me on has been my observation that many Christians are afraid of sermons and seminars on the topic of evangelism. They are afraid because so often they have been made to feel guilty and inadequate about their involvement in making the Gospel known. All too frequently this has not been a Spirit-induced sense of guilt and inadequacy that has led consequently to a deeper trust in God, to a growing gratitude for His love, or to transformation in the patterns of one's life. Rather this has been a humanly induced sense of guilt and inadequacy that has been paralyzing and that has driven an even deeper wedge between Christians and unbelievers. I long to see believers set free from this feeling of frustration and failure. In place of this I pray that the Lord will help believers realize that evangelism should be an encouraging and even exciting subject to think about and to put into practice.

What I have sought to do in this book is to examine once again what Jesus and His apostles teach us about evangelism, and also to look at the way they practiced evangelism so that we might learn both from their instruction and from their example. The hope inspiring all my teaching and writing on this subject is that we might recover the New Testament pattern of evangelism.

The first section of the book is a study of two of the occasions on which Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples. We also look at the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church to empower her for her task of witness to Christ. We will reflect on the different horizons for mission that Christ gave His apostles and consider how we might apply those horizons to our own context today. We will turn from this to see how the command of Jesus to go out into the unbelieving world with the truth about Him is a command for the whole

church all through its history, a command for each particular congregation, and a command for every individual believer. The latter part of Section One asks what this commission will mean for our prayers and for our daily lives at home, in the workplace, and out in the wider society.

Section Two turns from our responsibility to reach out with the truth to think instead about the work of God as He draws people to faith in Christ. God is the Great Evangelist! He is the One who saves, and He is the One who calls us to serve Him in His work of bringing men, women, and children to faith in His Son. We often forget this aspect of evangelism, mistakenly thinking that it is all up to us. Such a feeling can breed inadequacy, hopelessness, and even despair about the task of evangelism—that is, if we are honest about our weaknesses, failings, and poor efforts. Or it can breed arrogance if we foolishly believe that we are good evangelists!

In contrast to ourselves, we will see how patient and gracious God is. He labors, often for many years, to woo people and to win them to begin to love Jesus. In these chapters we will consider some of the infinite variety of means that God uses to touch people and to kindle the flame of faith in their hearts. In reflecting on these means we will study a number of biblical stories and some contemporary ones that teach us about the saving work of God in the lives of individuals.

In Section Three we will examine some of the barriers that stand in the way of Christians being faithful to the calling to make the Gospel known. We will look first at the barriers within ourselves—fear, anxiety, guilt, and overcommitment, and especially at the problem of the internal Pharisee we all carry inside us. Second, we will look at barriers between the church and the world:

- The loss of conviction about the truth of the Gospel.
- The unhappy consequences of the sacred/secular division.
- The failure to use language that is understood by non-Christians.
- The wall we erect between “us” (the Christians) and “them” (the unbelievers).

We will study this last problem in some detail, for I am convinced that it is often the primary reason why so many of us and so many of

our churches are uninterested and ineffective in evangelism. An “us versus them” mentality can produce fear of the world, a condemning, even hateful attitude toward “sinners,” a desire to retreat into the safe haven of our Christian institutions, and an insistence on personal separation from “sinners.” If we do not know non-Christians in any personal depth, it is evident that the only evangelism that can take place is technique-based raids from behind the wall of the church into the “enemy-occupied territory” of the world.

This is certainly not the kind of evangelism we read about in the New Testament. Consider the life and ministry of Jesus! But it is frequently what has replaced the pattern of evangelism that we find in the pages of the Gospels and the book of Acts. If I have a passion, it is that we Christians will learn to see the “glory and honor” (Psalm 8:5) of the unbelieving men and women around us and will delight in getting to know them and building friendships with them. As a seminary professor this is my prayer and longing for each of my students—that as they go out into ministry, they will be excited about committing themselves to a lifelong intention to be persons who, like Jesus, are welcomed gladly by the “sinners” around them.

From this barrier of “us versus them” we will turn to sketch briefly the barriers between the world and the church. Or to put it another way, to identify some of the characteristics of our postmodern culture that make communicating the Gospel a particular challenge today.

In Section Four, the final section of the book, we will look in detail at seven principles of communication that characterize the evangelistic ministry of the apostle Paul. These are respect, building bridges, understanding those to whom we go, using the right language, reasoned persuasion, clarifying the truth, and challenging the heart and mind.

These seven principles are drawn from a careful study of the messages given by Paul in three different settings, set down for us by Luke in the book of Acts. One of these messages is presented to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in a synagogue, one to uneducated pagans in Lystra, and one to educated pagans gathered on Mars Hill in Athens. We will see how these principles govern Paul’s practice of evangelism, and we will then apply them to our own differing situations today. Our study of the pattern of Paul is supplemented by reflection on several examples of evangelism in the ministry of Jesus.

Each of these principles arises from Paul’s commitment to be “all

things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22). Paul respected those he met—Jews and Gentiles, men and women, God-fearers and pagans, slaves and those who were free—for he saw that behind all their problems, all their unbelief, and all their sin they were persons made in the image of God. Paul built bridges, for he knew he would always find traces of the image of God that he could affirm in people’s lives, as well as elements of God’s truth that he could commend in the thinking of those he met. Paul could do this, for he believed that all people are constrained by God’s revelation of Himself in their own inner being and in the world in which they are set. Paul committed himself to understanding those to whom he desired to proclaim the Gospel, for he knew that only by understanding them could he, like Jesus, be able to communicate the truth to them in ways that would touch their hearts and minds. Paul worked hard at using the language of his hearers, rather than always using the language of his own biblical heritage, because he was eager for those listening to grasp the meaning of his message in words familiar to them.

Paul sought to persuade them of the truth of the Christian faith because he knew that it was true and that the whole world was full of testimony to that truth. He was eager to clarify the particular aspects of the truth that those he met needed to hear. Paul desired them to come to a right understanding of the nature of God, of themselves, of the world in which they lived, and of the saving work of God to deliver them from the coming judgment. Paul labored hard to challenge his hearers at those very points where their hearts were captive to the worship of idols and other gods and at those places where their minds were subject to false thinking about the human condition. Paul knew that everyone he met needed to turn from these things to the living God and to His Son Jesus, that they might be saved. In the same way, we have to challenge our contemporaries at the very points where they are bound by idolatry and by the faulty thinking of our culture.

It is my prayer that this book will be used by the Lord to kindle in you a desire to learn from this reflection on New Testament evangelism. I pray that you will be eager to shape your life according to the pattern of Paul, that God might be pleased to save some through you.

SENT TO ALL NATIONS

In the four Gospels and in the first chapter of Acts we have the privilege of listening in to Jesus' conversations with various people. We are in effect eavesdropping on God! The last three of these conversations that are recorded for us in the New Testament have to do with Jesus' task for His disciples after His return to reign at the Father's side. Christians often refer to this task assigned by Jesus to His disciples as the Great Commission. It was given in the days before our Savior's ascension into heaven, several weeks after the Resurrection.

Despite ongoing doubts among His disciples, being hard-hearted and slow to believe, just as you and I are, most of them were now thoroughly persuaded that Jesus was indeed risen from the dead, and so their faith that He was the Christ, the true Son of God, was firmly established. Now they were ready to get their marching orders, ready to hear from His lips what work it was that He wanted them to do. He gave this Great Commission on several occasions and in various forms so they would have no uncertainty about their calling.

We will look first at the account we find at the end of Matthew's Gospel (28:18-20). Jesus appeared to His disciples on a mountain in Galilee. They were back on home ground since so many of them came from the region around Lake Galilee. He gave them a command, and along with His command He added some words of encouragement.

“All authority in heaven and 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 surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”

GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES!

He commanded them to “go and make disciples of all nations.” We are so familiar with these words that we don’t stop to think how challenging they must have been to those who heard them from Jesus’ lips. This little group of eleven ordinary people were to go to all the nations of the earth and turn their hearers into disciples of Jesus like themselves! They were having a hard time believing in Him even though they had been with Him for three years and had lived through all the extraordinary events of His ministry and, in particular, of these past few weeks with His death and resurrection. Yet this little group who were so slow to believe were to convert the nations of the earth!

Most of them had probably not traveled beyond their own little patch of the world, the small kingdoms and provinces along either bank of the Jordan River and across Israel to the Mediterranean Sea. They would have heard from travelers about other parts of the vast Roman Empire that stretched right across north Africa, way up into northern and western Europe, up into Asia Minor (present-day Turkey and Armenia), and over eastward to the borders of Persia (present-day Iran). But they would have no personal knowledge of these faraway places or of the unknown countries and nations beyond these that they perhaps had heard described.

Yet these ignorant, unschooled men—these eleven—were to go and teach the nations to obey everything Jesus had taught them, and to baptize many in these nations into their newfound faith as they became followers of Jesus. Think of the challenge this commission still is to us today, and we take it for granted that we are part of a worldwide church numbering untold millions of followers of Jesus. Then try and imagine how the apostles must have felt!

THE AUTHORITY OF CHRIST

But Jesus also gave them some comforting words (they needed them!). He told them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to

me.” He rules the unseen world of the spirits. He triumphs over the demons. He defeats the false gods of the nations and breaks their power so that His disciples are able to go out into the world with confidence. They will know, as they proclaim the Gospel, that Jesus has the name that is above every name in the heavens, above every power of darkness, above every spiritual force of wickedness. These men already knew that in the Roman Empire and beyond, people worshiped many different gods. They were being sent out into a pagan world where most of the people they would try to reach would be under the influence of spirits and false gods. They had experienced firsthand the power of the hosts of Satan as those enemies tested them and sought the death of Jesus. But Jesus assured them that just as He had conquered Satan by His death on the cross and made that adversary’s plans of no effect, so he would rule the heavenly powers for them as they went into the pagan world.

RULER OF THE NATIONS

Jesus also encouraged them by saying that all power has been granted to Him over this earth. Jesus would rule the nations for their sake as they traveled to them. He would open doors around the world to places that seemed inaccessible. He is the Lord above every lord, the King above every king. Even Caesar, the emperor of an area so vast it was unimaginable to them, would be subject to Jesus. This was the first of His comforting words to the disciples as He gave them their “impossible” calling.

It is the same for us. All the powers of the nations, all the unseen powers of darkness, are in subjugation to Christ. There is indeed only one superpower today, and it is not the United States or its President. It is the Lord Jesus Christ. He rules the nations for the sake of His church, for the sake of the Gospel going out to those nations.

THE PRESENCE OF JESUS

Jesus had some additional encouraging words for them. The first were about power. The second were personal. Jesus promised that He Himself would be with them. Wherever they would go, however hard the road,

however challenging the situation, however unwelcoming the people, whatever their feeling of weakness, He would be beside them providing comfort, encouragement, and strength, just as He had been for the past three years of their lives. They would never again be alone. This is His promise to us too, to accompany us always along whatever path into the world He calls us to travel.

THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Our second example of the Great Commission Jesus gave His disciples is found in Acts 1 and was spoken to them immediately before the Ascension. He had previously urged them to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came to baptize them with His presence. The Spirit was the gift that His Father had promised Him for His disciples. On the night before He died, and on many earlier occasions, Jesus had spoken about this gift of the Spirit that they would receive. Now, He said, that gift would soon be coming, a gift they would receive on the Day of Pentecost, but that we today receive when we first come to faith in Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:13-14).

The disciples were still waiting for this gift when they saw Jesus for the last time. They asked Him one final question: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). They were not thinking about the task Jesus had set before them on several occasions. They did not at this moment want to remember His words to them that they must preach the Gospel to all the nations before the end would come.

They wanted to know *when* the kingdom would come, and they wanted it to come *now*. They wanted to hear about His plans to drive the Romans out of the Promised Land and begin His victorious reign as Messiah. They recalled clearly enough that He would rule the nations, and they wanted Him to start right away and set them on thrones ruling beside Him. He had power over all things; He could surely exercise it for Himself, for them, and for His people Israel! But Jesus replied to them in a very different way than they expected.

UNAVAILABLE KNOWLEDGE

They would not be told when the kingdom will come, when Israel will be restored, when the Second Coming in glory will be. This knowledge was not available to the apostles, nor is it available to us! They undoubtedly were speculating among themselves about just when Jesus Christ would use His power to reign over the nations. Christians love to speculate about the end of the age and make predictions and plans for it, just as many have been doing in our time in the transition from the second to the third millennium A.D. Jesus has said that it is not ours to know; indeed He said that it is not His to know either (Matthew 24:36). Not even Jesus, the Son of God, knows when He will come! We may pray for His coming. We should long for it. But we cannot know when it will be.

AVAILABLE POWER

“If you want power,” Jesus said to them in effect, “you will have it. When the Spirit is given to you, power will be yours. But it will not be power to restore Israel and to destroy the enemies of the kingdom. It will not even be the knowledge of when these things will take place. It will be power to witness about Me and the truth of the message I have given you to spread around the world.” The church has power today. You and I have power today. But this power is very different than the power we may desire. We want power to see the kingdom coming, power for the healing of our loved ones, power for getting our way personally, or power for having a “Christian nation once again,” power for America in the world.

We all have our own agendas for Jesus, just as the apostles had one for Him. He, however, has an agenda for us. His agenda is power for us to be living, speaking testimonies for Him to an unbelieving world, power to love our enemies, power to bless those who curse us, power to forgive as He forgives us, power to love one another. This is the coming of the kingdom that He has in mind for us now. The other kind of power will come later; but this is the power He exercised in His death on the cross, and it is the power He gives us. There is no other power for the church or for the Christian now.

The disciples would be given this power of the Spirit to witness to the world. What did this mean for them, and what does it mean for us?

On an earlier occasion Jesus had promised that the Spirit would be a witness to Him.

“When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me; but you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”

—JOHN 15:26-27

As the apostles went out into the world, they could have the confidence that whenever they talked about Christ, the Spirit would be witnessing to Christ along with their testimony. The same is true for us. We are never alone when we seek to communicate the truth about Jesus.

Later on that evening, during those final hours before His betrayal, Jesus told His disciples more about the work that the Spirit would do. His task would be to work in the hearts of men and women, convicting them of guilt and of righteousness and of judgment (John 16:8ff.). We sometimes think it is our responsibility to convict people of sin, our task to make them feel their guilt. But Jesus teaches us that this is the Spirit’s work, that He is able to touch the hearts of unbelievers (and of believers, too, of course) in a way that we never can.

We have confidence, then, that the Spirit is witnessing to the hearts and minds of people alongside us. (Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that we are witnessing alongside the Spirit as He works within unbelievers’ minds and hearts. He calls us to help Him, rather than us calling Him to help us!) Does He assist us in our task of evangelism in other ways too? Does He give us power to be Christ’s witnesses?

Jesus promised that the Spirit will aid our memories, so that we are able to recall the words of Scripture that we have heard and read (John 14:26). He will also guide us into the truth and enable us to speak the truth (John 16:13), for the Scripture promises us that if we lack wisdom, we can ask for it and God will give it to us generously and without finding fault with us (James 1:5). In addition, Jesus told His disciples there would be occasions when they would be called before kings and governors or would be arrested and put on trial for their faith. He encouraged them not to worry ahead of time about what they should say, for the Holy Spirit would give them the words to speak (Mark 13:9-11).

Though Jesus was speaking to His disciples about arrest and trial as consequences of persecution, there is a wider application of His promise. Whenever we are called to bear witness to Jesus we are on trial for our faith, our faith in Christ is on trial, and Christ Himself is on trial; so we can ask for the Spirit's help with the expectation that it is His delight to answer such prayers.

As well as helping us know what to say, the Spirit will also help us to speak clearly and graciously if we ask Him. The apostle Paul asked for prayer that God would help him speak clearly (Colossians 4:4), and we may make the same prayer. In addition Paul asked people to pray that he would be given courage (Ephesians 6:19-20). All of us also need courage, and we may be assured that the Spirit will be pleased to help us. He, the Spirit, is our counselor, our guide, the One called alongside us to help us in our every need. So we may go to Him asking for His assistance in every possible way whenever we want to share the truth of the Gospel.

There is one further way in which the Lord helps us, and that is by opening doors for us to share the Gospel (Colossians 4:3). We follow One who rules the nations, but He also rules over our own personal lives and over the events that take place from day to day. Even the hairs of our heads are numbered by Him; every detail, no matter how insignificant, is within His fatherly care. So we can ask that He will provide opportunities for us to share what we have come to believe. As He goes before us and prepares our way, He calls us to follow His lead and make the most of the opportunities and the open doors that He gives us (Colossians 4:3-6).

What more do we need? Christ is ruling the nations for us (consider the present possibilities for proclaiming the Gospel in what was the Communist bloc). The Father is watching over our lives personally, providing opportunities and open doors. The Spirit is working both in us and in those to whom we are called. With such promises of help, why do we all find evangelism burdensome, difficult, or sometimes even impossible? We will try to answer this question in a later chapter, but for now we return to the Great Commission as it is found in Acts 1.

HORIZONS FOR OUR MISSION

THE FINAL COMMISSION (ACTS 1:6-11)

On previous occasions when Jesus commissioned His disciples He had promised help and power for the task of witness, in addition to sending them to the nations. On this final reminder of their calling, Jesus reaffirmed to His disciples the worldwide extent of the Commission. Just before His ascension, He spelled out for them several horizons for the unfolding of their missionary endeavors:

- Jerusalem.
- Judea.
- Samaria.
- The ends of the earth.

As we read the book of Acts we can see that Luke shows how the mission to these four horizons began to be fulfilled in the years following Pentecost. (See, for example, Acts 2:5; 6:7; 8:2-5; 11:19-21; 28:30-31.) Because the Great Commission is for the whole church of Christ and not just for the apostles, it is an appropriate application to conclude that the church in every age is called to a similar range of horizons. However, as we will see a bit later, we may express this calling as five horizons of mission rather than four. These horizons provide a challenge and a measuring stick for the faithfulness of each of our churches to Jesus' commission.

OUR JERUSALEM

Our Jerusalem, we may say in application, is the city in which we live, work, study, and raise our families, whether it is small or great. Jerusalem, for me personally and for the church in which I serve, is St. Louis City and County. What is your Jerusalem? What are you doing and what is your church doing to draw people from your locality to Jesus?

OUR JUDEA

Our Judea, we may say, is the country to which we belong, whether by birth, adoption, or immigration. For me, though I am British by birth, my Judea is the United States, for this is now my home. Are we planting churches and sending out missionaries into every part of this nation (for example, into the schools, the colleges, the military, the business world, the prisons, as well as into our cities, suburbs, and rural communities)?

OUR SAMARIA

Our Samaria is those people among us and alongside us who are different from us. Samaria was right next to Judea, and its people, despite their historical ties to the Jews, were racially, culturally, and religiously so different that there was deep hostility between the two. We need to ask ourselves, “What is our Samaria?” Are we reaching across the racial, cultural, and religious barriers that exist in our society with the Gospel of Jesus Christ made known in our lives and in our words of reconciliation? What barriers are you reaching across with the love of Christ? What is your church doing to build bridges to its Samaria?

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Whom are we sending to the nations of the earth, especially to those places and peoples where there are no believers or very few? In Isaiah 49:5-7 we find one of the most beautiful statements found in any part of Scripture.

*And now the Lord says . . .
“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob*

*and bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”*

God tells His Son, the Messiah, that it was too small a thing for Him, the Lord and Father, to send His Servant, Christ, into the world just to reach His people Israel and to redeem them. Rather than saving just one people, He desired His salvation to reach to the ends of the earth. In the same way, it should be “too small” for us just to reach out to our own people, for God calls us to have a worldwide concern. What is your part and what is your church’s part in taking the Gospel to the nations?

THE FIFTH HORIZON

I would like to also mention a fifth horizon—the original, literal “Jerusalem, and . . . Judea.” God has not forgotten the people of Israel, and neither should any Christian believer. The Jewish people are God’s olive tree into which we are grafted if we are Gentiles. Paul writes of the people of Israel:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!

—ROMANS 9:4-5

We should love the Jewish people for the sake of their heritage, which we have been privileged to receive through Jesus Christ. We should pray for them and long to see them come to know their Messiah. The apostle Paul expressed this same calling in other words. He said in the first chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome (1:16):

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

There is indeed a priority for the Jews as a nation in God’s work in

history, and so in a sense the Gospel is always for the Jew “first,” for the Jews were the people whom God chose to be His vehicle of blessing to the whole world. Initially, from the time of Abraham, through their obedience in living and making known to the nations the truth God entrusted to them; then, after more than 2,000 years, by their being the people through whom the Messiah, Jesus, was born into this world for the saving of all peoples.

In addition to recognizing this special place in God’s plan for the world, the apostle Paul also had a deep passion to communicate to his fellow Israelites because they were his own people. He wrote that he could wish himself accursed for their sake:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

—ROMANS 9:1-4

Moses expressed his love for his people in this same way after they had created the golden calf and then fell down in worship before it:

“Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written.”

—EXODUS 32:31-32

Moses and Paul were ready to be forsaken by God for the sake of their people. They, of course, were not good enough or powerful enough to do this for the people they loved so deeply. But Christ *was* good enough and powerful enough to be accursed for them and for us. He not only declared that His love was even greater than the love of Moses or Paul—He died to demonstrate the reality of this great love. Indeed, He died to become a curse for us, to bear the fair justice of His Father that sentences us to eternal separation from God. The contemporary English hymn writer Graham Kendrick has captured this love of Christ for us in a song:

*Such love, pure as the whitest snow,
Such love weeps for the shame I know,
Such love paying the debt I owe,
O Jesus such love!*

*Such love springs from eternity,
Such love streaming through history,
Such love fountain of life to me,
O Jesus such love!*

We cannot take upon ourselves the sins of others or bear their sin's curse and the judgment it brings upon them. But our heart attitude can be the same as that of Moses and Paul, and of the Lord whose self-sacrificing love they imitated. We are to love those who are our own people to such a degree that we would wish ourselves cut off from our Father's fellowship if it would save them from His just judgment. Those believers who have family members or others they care for deeply will understand this depth of feeling very well. How we long to see those we treasure come to know the Lord!

Whether we are black, white, Hispanic, Asian, or Native American, whatever our national and ethnic background, we should have "such love" as we long to make God's truth known to our brothers and sisters. In addition, we are called to love and reach out to the Jews and to all other peoples across the world.

This brief reflection on the love that Paul, Moses, and, above all, Jesus had for people reminds us that the primary motivation for outreach is love. First, it is to be love for the Lord who loved us with "such love." Only His love for us will change our cold hearts and enable us to be willing to obey His command to reach our Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and all nations (including Israel) with the Gospel. Second, it is to be love for those around us in family, neighborhood, community, city, nation, and the world, whether they are like us or whether they are different from us. Again, it is only His love, poured into our hearts by the Spirit He gives us, that will empower us with the first fruits of "such love."

HOW CLEAR WAS JESUS?

We have been considering the horizons Jesus gave for the missionary outreach of the disciples, and also the help He promised to give them, both through the Spirit and through His rule over the nations and over their personal lives. So far we have seen that Jesus' command is universal in its scope. Was Jesus really so clear about this? Or are we perhaps reading too much back into the Great Commission? Did the disciples understand what we have assumed the texts to mean?

It was the Eleven, the apostles, who first heard Jesus charge them with the Great Commission. This was Jesus' last command to them; so they were left in no doubt that this going "to all the world" with the Gospel was the passion of His heart for their years of ministry. He laid out a plan for them, beginning at home in Jerusalem, then going out to Judea, Samaria, and the nations. This was a plan that, if they understood its scope, would clearly take more than their lifetime to fulfill.

APOSTOLIC TESTIMONY

It is evident from their writing that they did understand the long-term nature of this commission. Consider, for example, the words of Paul in Romans 15:16, 20-21. (Paul was given this same worldwide task by Jesus when he was confronted, converted, and called to be an apostle on the Damascus Road—Acts 26:12-18.)

[I was called] to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that

the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God. . . . It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation. Rather, as it is written: "Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand."

From this example of Paul's sense of calling, it is apparent that the apostles clearly understood that Christ was sending them into the whole world with the Gospel. He desired them to go to those who had never heard the good news about His salvation so that they too might believe in Him and enter the kingdom.

THE DEMONSTRATION OF PENTECOST

On the Day of Pentecost the apostles and the small group of believers with them were given a dramatic illustration by Jesus of what He had planned for them, and in this way His spoken command was underlined, so to speak, by a historical event. The Feast of Pentecost (the fiftieth day after the Sabbath of Passover week) was also called the Feast of Weeks, the Feast of Harvest, and the Day of Firstfruits (Exodus 23:16; Leviticus 23:15-16; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:10).

The Father sent the Spirit onto the disciples, just as Jesus had promised, His presence manifested in wind, fire, and tongues. Wind represents the creative power of the Spirit who can give life where there is not yet life (as in Genesis 1 at Creation), or even where there is death (as in the Valley of Dry Bones of Ezekiel 37). Fire represents the holiness of the Spirit, who will burn away the dross of sin and uncleanness in a new believer's heart and bring purity and righteousness in their place. The gift of tongues represents the diversity of languages in the human race and the Spirit's intent to reach all nations.

Jesus demonstrated His promised rule over the nations and over His people's lives in the events of Pentecost. Luke tells us that there were people, both Jews and Gentiles, "from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). Pentecost teaches the disciples (and us) several lessons.

The New Humanity

At Babel God had separated the human race into nations by dividing the languages in order to limit the abuse of power by sinful rulers and to limit the hubris of humanity in its desire to live without God. Pentecost created a new humanity no longer separated by sin or by language divisions, but rather united by Christ and by love for one another through the Spirit of love poured into human hearts. The Spirit enabled those present to understand each other across the barrier of language. While today we are not usually granted the gift of tongues (instantaneous ability to speak in or to comprehend a previously unknown language) in order to understand the words of other believers when we travel, yet a Christian does experience a wonderful unity despite the divisions of language. We are truly part of a new race, a race that is to transcend the bitter hostilities that tear people apart.

All the Languages of the World

The diversity of languages represented there in Jerusalem at Pentecost was the firstfruits of the harvest of languages that Christ will gather from every part of this world. In the kingdom to come there will be people who have come to believe in Christ representing every language group. Pentecost demonstrates that Christ wants His disciples to go to people of every language with the Gospel and that He is able to gift those He calls so they can understand and communicate in the languages of the people to whom they go. I am not suggesting here that every missionary is promised the ability to speak new languages instantaneously, but God does desire that His people go to all language groups, and He does indeed give His people language gifts for the tasks to which He calls them.

Every Corner of the Globe

There was also a diversity of people geographically there in Jerusalem to hear the apostles preach the good news about Jesus. If we look carefully at Luke's list of some of the places from which those at Pentecost had come, we see that it includes people from every point of the compass who had converged on Jerusalem for the Feast: Pontus and

Cappadocia to the north; Mesopotamia, Parthia, and Media to the northeast; Elam to the east; Arabia to the southeast; Judea to the south; Egypt to the southwest; Crete to the west; Rome, Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia to the northwest. Some of these places, like Pontus, are near to Jerusalem, relatively speaking; some, like Rome, are much farther away. Luke clearly wants us to understand, and teaches us that Jesus wanted the church to understand, that the Gospel is for every corner of this earth. Jesus had earlier told His disciples:

“People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God.”

—LUKE 13:29

Every Race

Another way to express this diversity would be to look at Luke’s list and see there people who are descended from the three racial groups represented by the sons of Noah: Hamites from North Africa; Shemites from the Middle East; Japhethites from Europe. The Gospel of Christ is for all races, and all ethnic and racial divisions are to be transcended by the unity we have in Christ.

Every Kind of People from Every Sort of Place

We can add that Luke includes peoples from within the Roman Empire and peoples from beyond its borders, such as the Parthians and Elamites. He includes people from great cities like Rome, the capital of the vast empire, and from the deserts of Arabia; people from great empires and their provinces and from islands in the ocean. He includes both Jews, the inheritors of the covenant, and Gentiles. In other words, Luke covers every possible way he can think of to show the universal scope of the Great Commission. With this extraordinary demonstration on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus showed His disciples that the Gospel is intended for all peoples. The apostles understood this, as we see from the way Luke presents his account of Pentecost to us, and as we see elsewhere in the New Testament (for example, in the writings of John). When John

looked into heaven, he heard the “new song” of the elders and living creatures before the throne of Christ:

*“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased men for God
from every tribe and language
and people and nation.”*

—REVELATION 5:9