

Reconciliation as Mission: Practicing God’s Love among the Nations

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It is time to break out of a reductionist view of the Great Commission and to understand it as Jesus inviting us to participate with him in God’s whole mission to reconcile all things.¹

One of the sources for this conviction is a sermon that was written by Covenant forebear Paul Peter Waldenström 150 years ago.² This famous sermon (or infamous, depending on one’s perspective) had a part to play in my approach to mission. His thoughts on our salvation as rooted in God’s love reinforced my developing understanding of the church’s mission as participating with a loving God in the reconciliation of all things in Christ.

Waldenström emphasized love as the driving force for God the Father to send God the Son to save the world through the cross, and he did so amid the prevailing view that Christ’s work on the cross was mainly to appease God’s wrath. Does the cross of Christ represent salvation by the love of God or salvation from the wrath of God? While this might seem hairsplitting for some, I contend that it makes a profound difference for mission, for it determines the church’s essential message to the world. Is it, “God loves you and invites you back in right relationship,” or is it,

¹ This paper is an adaptation of Al Tizon, “Reconciliation and the Great (Whole) Commission,” *International Review of Mission* 110.1 (May 2021): 16–26. Published with permission.

² P. P. Waldenström, “Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity (1872),” as cited in Glenn P. Anderson, ed., *Covenant Roots: Sources and Affirmations* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999), 113–31.

“Turn or burn?”

I hope we can agree that the first message aligns better with the gospel message. The good news of God’s love is in fact what the church has been commissioned to announce to the world. Mission in the way of Waldenström is rooted in, and announced and practiced as, love for the world in the name of Jesus. Only by basing our mission in God’s love can we talk about reconciliation. Love leads to reconciliation; or in academic-speak, a soteriology of love leads to a missiology of reconciliation.

Reconciliation: The New Whole in Holistic Mission

More than ever before we need to talk about reconciliation and to understand that reconciliation, holistically understood, is the paradigm of mission that will best bear witness to Jesus in today’s fragmented and fragmenting world. I had the privilege of writing a book a few years ago wherein I propose that reconciliation is the new “whole” in holistic mission.³ Holistic mission, as we know, has referred to an approach of mission that attempts to put back together the ministries of evangelism and social responsibility. These two ministries should never have been separated in the first place, and we need to continue to affirm their integrity. But as I have reflected on the cracks in the foundation of the world, I am compelled to rethink what it means to be holistic.

In a world so divided, holistic mission can no longer be just about putting word and deed back together again; it needs to be about putting the world back together again. It needs to be about participating with God in the ministry of reconciliation between God and people, between people and people, and between God, people, and creation.

Though Waldenström’s sermon dealt almost exclusively on the vertical dimension of reconciliation, I think he would have approved this broader understanding. In fact, if we look beyond the sermon to other writings, particularly his small book entitled *Reconciliation*, we would see that he was more explicit about the necessity of loving our neighbor, and he argued this in terms of reconciliation—what I identified in my book as the horizontal dimension.⁴ Therefore, though the sermon spoke almost exclusively of the vertical nature of reconciliation—that is, how

³ Al Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled: Gospel, Church, and Mission in a Fragmented World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018). This essay includes several quotes from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*. Used by permission from Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. See <http://bakerpublishinggroup.com>.

⁴ P. P. Waldenström, *The Reconciliation: Who Was to Be Reconciled? God or Man? Or God and Man?* (Chicago: John Martenson, 1888).

the cross paved the way for humankind to be reconciled to God—I imagine Waldenström smiling right now as we consider reconciliation in broader terms.

What Is Reconciliation?

Reconciliation is a rich, biblical, theological idea that is based on God's big vision to make whole the world and everyone in it. As I noted in my book, "God's vision of reconciliation only makes sense in light of the biblical story of creation and fall. In the beginning God created *shalom*—a social order wherein perfect harmony existed between the Creator, humanity, and ecosystem—until that *shalom* was shattered by sin (Gen 1–3).

Reconciliation means God's initiative to restore wholeness to a shattered creation. Colossians 1:20 beautifully sums up God's agenda in terms of reconciliation. This biblical text states that 'through [Christ], God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven.' The ministry of reconciliation, therefore, to which God has called the church (2 Cor 5:18–20), refers to our participation in God's big vision 'to reconcile all things in Christ'.⁵ This is our mission.

I have already alluded to reconciliation as involving at least three dimensions: the vertical (between God and people), the horizontal (between people and people), and a third, which probably stretches Waldenstrom's work on reconciliation to the limit—namely the circular dimension (between God, people, and creation). These dimensions provide the basic framework of the paradigm of "reconciliation as mission." The vertical, horizontal, and circular, or "triple reconciliation for individual persons, society, and creation," point to the main objects of God's mission and therefore, the church's mission.

Missionally speaking, these dimensions express themselves in the ministries of (1) evangelism, facilitating reconciliation between God and people; (2) peacemaking, between people and people; and (3) stewardship, between God, people, and creation. The church as evangelist, peacemaker, and steward equals the church as reconciler, the church being commissioned by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to make disciples of and among the nations as it participates with God in the reconciliation of all things.⁶

⁵ Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, xviii.

⁶ The last two paragraphs quote directly from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 87, 174.

The Not-So Great Commission

Only when our understanding of the Great Commission is holistic like this can we call the Great Commission great. Let me say it another way: the greatness of the Great Commission requires evangelism, peacemaking, and stewardship; it requires God's whole mission of reconciliation if it is going to be truly great, if it is going to be truly loving. The Great Commission is not so great and not very loving when it is only one-dimensional instead of three-dimensional.

And here, let me humbly reprimand us as evangelicals, who popularized the term "Great Commission" in the first place. As a consequence of our narrow theology, we have essentially equated the Great Commission with the ministry of evangelism. Matthew 28 has become our premiere evangelistic missionary text. Inspired by it, we have gone about the task of world evangelization with abandon, creating strategies based on unreached people groups, the 10/40 window, and the homogeneous unit principle to help us fulfill the Great Commission. I argue that a one-dimensional, evangelism-only theology and practice of the Great Commission is incomplete at best and dangerous at worst. It has been the cause of devastating sins against humanity over the centuries.

As New Testament scholar Mitzi Smith disturbingly points out in the context of colonized Africa, "Many missionaries, in collusion with European colonizers, separated the physical, unjust, inhumane treatment and oppression of Africans . . . from the saving of their souls."⁷ Referring specifically to the tragic misinterpretation of the Great Commission in which social justice had no place, she continues her strong critique and writes, "Teaching and baptizing black souls trumped the liberating of black bodies from the shackles of their white oppressors."⁸

There are literally millions of what I call "victims of the Great Commission"—people, primarily among black and brown cultures, whose dignity, lifeways, and loved ones were profoundly messed with and some gone forever in the service of the one-dimensional Great Commission-inspired evangelization of the world. The undeniable history of colonial missions screams for the necessity of rethinking the Great Commission, and I contend that we do that by defining it in terms of God's mission

⁷ Mitzi J. Smith, "'Knowing More than Is Good for One': A Womanist Interrogation of the Matthean Great Commission," in *Teaching All Nations: Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission*, ed. Mitzi J. Smith and Jayachitra Lalitha (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 128–29.

⁸ Smith and Lalitha, 129. And this paragraph is quoted from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 157–58.

to reconcile *all things* in Christ.

Or we could just do away with the Great Commission paradigm altogether. Contrary to popular belief, “the Great Commission” is not a biblical phrase. It originated with Justinian Von Welz in the 17th century but was popularized by famous missionary Hudson Taylor of the China Inland Mission in the latter part of the 19th century.⁹ The iconic labeling of Matthew 28 as the Great Commission evidently caught on so thoroughly that it has been confused through the years with scripture itself, as if written by the very finger of God.¹⁰

Mitzi Smith opts to do away with the iconic label so we can interpret the passage anew through a different lens. While this approach has merit,¹¹ I propose a different one for us as evangelicals, because as far as we are concerned, it is tattooed on the body of Christ. I propose, therefore, instead of trying to remove the Great Commission tattoo, that we fill in, deepen, beautify, and complete it. Let us make the Great Commission truly great and truly loving, by rethinking it or redesigning it, if you will, in terms of the three-dimensional paradigm of reconciliation as mission. Let us fill it out with other passages that we could easily label as “great” as well. I am convinced that the greatness of the Great Commission depends on other “Bible Greats.” Taking our cue from Justinian Von Welz and Hudson Taylor, let us label as “great” specific passages that correspond with the ministries of evangelism, peacemaking, and stewardship.

The Great Peace

Beginning with the horizontal dimension of peacemaking, let us turn to the Great Peace passage of Revelation 7:9–10 (NRSV):

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the lamb.”

This is the Great Peace to come. The greatness of the Great Commission depends on how seriously we let the Great Peace shape our practice of

⁹ Robbie F. Castleman, “The Last Word: The Great Commission Ecclesiology,” *Themelios* 3.3 (May 2007), 68.

¹⁰ See Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 166.

¹¹ Quoted from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 166.

mission among all tribes, peoples, and languages. In the Great Peace passage, the seer caught a glimpse of a future worship service that included countless people from every people group (v. 9). We see them there poised for worship because the One standing before them put an end to persecution, hunger, natural disasters, mourning, tears, and death (vv. 14–17).

Paul certainly understood that the ministry of the gospel involved breaking down dividing walls and becoming an intercultural fellowship in Christ. He reminded the Ephesian believers, for example, that Christ was their peace, “who has made [Jew and Gentile] one, and [who] has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two” (Eph 2:14–15). I believe Paul knew intuitively that by making peace between Jew and Gentile, he reflected the Great Peace to come.

Peacemaking strives in the Spirit to reflect nothing less than the *shalom* of God in social relationships, going beyond the mere absence of conflict to full-on, relational embrace between oppressed and oppressor, victim and victimizer, abused and abuser.

Reverend John Kiruga, who served as the moderator (or president) of the Evangelical Covenant Church of Kenya, was killed a few years ago by members of the extremist group Al-Shabaab, ironically, while traveling home after conducting a peace seminar between Muslims and Christians. Just a few days prior, Kiruga emailed Dave Husby, then director of Covenant World Relief and Development, “[I’m] at Garrisa ... heading to Mandera tomorrow. Pray for us. Pray for Kenya. Political temperatures are high. ... Mandera is not safe, but we must preach peace at all costs.” It turned out that the cost of preaching peace for John was his life.¹²

Kiruga was not always a peacemaker. His earlier views of Muslims included the belief that God did not love them. Prejudice formed in his heart, and Kiruga’s conversion to Christ did not immediately change this. The combination of zealous faith and a one-dimensional view of

Islam meant for him only one kind of legitimate interaction with

¹² This account, including quotes, is based on several articles, which slightly differ in detail: “Bus Ambush in Northern Kenya Kills Six,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 1, 2016 <http://www.dw.com/en/bus-ambush-in-northern-kenya-kills-six/a-19370980>; Stan Friedman, “Kenya Church Moderator Led Peacemaking Seminar Prior to Death,” *Covenant Companion*, July 3, 2016 <http://covenantcompanion.com/2016/07/03/kenyan-church-moderator-led-peacemaking-seminar-prior-to-death/>; John Kiruga with introduction by David Husby, “Peace at Any Cost,” *Covenant Companion*, November 21, 2016.

Muslims: evangelism through traditional apologetics and secret meetings. Muslims need to be saved, plain and simple.

Kiruga reported several success stories in winning Muslims to Christ. But as these new converts experienced heavy persecution from their families and communities, he began to realize the complexity of Muslim evangelism. A deep, underlying distrust between Christians and Muslims exposed the inadequacy of his methods. “That’s when God revealed to me,” he shared, “that we needed to move beyond debates and arguments. We had to start preaching the gospel of peace.”

This revelation of the need to preach Christ’s peace resulted in a more relational approach for Kiruga, ministering with and among Muslims to better their communities. He began to minister in this way among the isolated, dispossessed, Muslim community of the Waata people. Such an approach contrasted sharply with the aggressive evangelistic methods of many churches (including Kiruga’s), which only exacerbated the Christian-Muslim tension, and thus hindering the spread of the gospel.¹³

If the practice of the Great Commission does not include the Great Peace as a part of its vision and therefore its mission, if it does not find its inspiration in the all-tribes-and-nations future of God in Revelation 7, then I contend that the Great Commission is not so great.

The Great Renewal

Another essential “Bible great” corresponds with the circular dimension of reconciliation, what I call the Great Renewal found in Isaiah 65:17–25 (NRSV):

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight. I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people; no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and

¹³ The preceding three paragraphs are quoted from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 172.

eat their fruit. . . . They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity; for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well. . . . [And] the wolf and the lamb shall feed together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The Great Renewal passage is replete with God's renewing work of creation. It says that God is about to recreate the heavens and the earth (v. 17), indicated by justice, fertile land, majestic mountains, long life, zero percent infant mortality rate, and harmony between wolves and lambs.

The greatness of the Great Commission depends on how seriously we allow the Great Renewal to shape our practice of mission—in other words, how we incorporate ecological stewardship or creation care in our practice of mission. The church as steward has been entrusted by God to care for, manage, and cultivate that which belongs to God. This includes everything from financial holdings to the environment and everything in between. From coins to creation, the call to be good stewards is an integral part of authentic Christian discipleship.

It is not incidental that the Great Commission passage begins with Jesus's declaration of his authority over "heaven and earth." Chris Wright points out that the "combination 'heaven and earth' is the typical scriptural way of referring to the whole of creation,"¹⁴ and, according to Matthew 28:18, Jesus is Lord over all of it. Wright observes that "the Great Commission does not begin with a command, but with an affirmation," referring to Jesus's opening words, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me" (v. 18).¹⁵ As I noted in my book, the statement declares the authority or lordship of Christ, but not just over humanity as the church typically thinks, but over the whole created order.¹⁶

Realizing creation's inclusion in God's mission should disturb us because we have not done well in this area. As I wrote in my earlier work, we have in fact "done great violence to the earth and its inhabitants. By assaulting creation, we have assaulted ourselves, and have disrespected the Lord of heaven and earth. Based on a faulty theology of dominion, the church has helped to perpetuate the idea that the earth and its nonhuman inhabitants are primarily 'natural resources' to satisfy humanity's needs and fancies without caution or compassion. Misinterpreting dominion

¹⁴ Chris Wright, *Five Marks of Mission: Making God's Mission Ours*, M-Series (Milton Keynes, UK: Micah Global, 2015), 29.

¹⁵ Wright, 29.

¹⁶ See Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 179.

as domination, broken humanity has cleared forests, blown up coral reefs, dumped waste in oceans, hunted animals for sport, created factory farms, and experimented cruelly on animals.¹⁷ For such tragedies, I believe humanity will be held accountable. When the church does not see the care of God's creation—the Great Renewal—as part of the Great Commission, then it paints a less-than whole picture of God's mission to reconcile all things.¹⁸ Worse, when the church participates in the earth's destruction, we do an injustice to the gospel.

If, for example, a man enters a church who claims to be a follower of Jesus but tracks cakes of mud into the foyer, litters in the sanctuary, carves his name on the pew in front of him, and decorates the bathroom stall with graffiti; would not the ushers do their job and not-so-kindly escort him out? Furthermore, upon discovering the man's dog near dead from the summer heat because he left it in the car with the windows closed, would not the ushers report him to the authorities for animal cruelty? Indeed, as Peter Harris notes, "If we proclaim Christ the Creator but demonstrate an abusive or indifferent relationship to creation, we send confused signals."¹⁹

From coins to creation, the call to be good stewards is an integral part of authentic Christian discipleship and mission. Stewardship is integral to the Great Commission. To the extent that the church serves the world as steward, it bears witness to the coming Day when creation will stop groaning, when the lion will lie down with the lamb, when the trees of the field will clap their hands. At the end of time when God in Christ will reconcile all things, we will see not only the redemption of humanity, but also a restored ecology.²⁰ Engaged in the Great Commission, the church as steward bears witness to "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. ... On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit ... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev 22:1–2). The greatness of the Great Commission depends on taking seriously the Great Renewal of Isaiah 65 and Revelation 21 and 22.

¹⁷ See Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 179.

¹⁸ Tizon, 170

¹⁹ This paragraph is quoted from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 180, and see also: Peter Harris, "Living and Serving in God's Creation," in *Down-to-Earth Christianity: Creation-Care in Ministry*, ed. W. Dayton Roberts and Paul E. Pretiz (Wynwood, PA: Association of Evangelical Relief and Development Organizations and Evangelical Environmental Network, 2000), 167.

²⁰ This sentence is quoted from Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 181.

The Great Sacrifice

If the two previous Bible greats emphasized the peace and creation care side of the gospel, then the Great Sacrifice emphasizes the atoning work of the gospel, again, where Waldenström's sermon focused. I call 1 Corinthians 11:23–26 the Great Sacrifice passage:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Central to the greatness of the Great Commission is the church's message of Jesus Christ, who died to atone for the sins of the world and who rose again to become the hope of the world. The Great Sacrifice defines the good news of forgiveness and hope in terms of Jesus, Savior of the world. In Waldenström's words, "In [Jesus's] name, there is now preached the forgiveness of sins, righteousness, life, and eternal blessedness, and this for the sinner of every kind, of all people and all tongues."²¹

Without this kind of specificity, we reduce the Great Commission to a mere humanitarian mission like Red Cross, the United Nations, and other international relief, development, and peacekeeping organizations.²² As such, the Great Commission would fall short of God's desire to bring lost and alienated people back to God's own self. The Great Commission takes seriously the transformation and healing of the human heart or else reconciliation would be tragically incomplete. The church must preach nothing less than the Great Sacrifice—the crucified and risen Jesus, and thus make disciples of Jesus.

Evangelism is the embodied communication of the good news of the kingdom of God and Jesus Christ the king to those who have not yet appropriated God's love and forgiveness in their lives, paying attention to both what we proclaim (what is the gospel?) and how we proclaim

²¹ Waldenström, "Sermon," 127.

²² See Tizon, *Whole & Reconciled*, 169.

it (how do we preach the gospel to this generation in this culture?). Without this kind of specificity, without proclaiming the Great Sacrifice, the Great Commission is just average, not great. The Great Commission derives its greatness from the clear conviction of the hope found in the crucified and risen Jesus.

Conclusion

The Great Commission is great and fueled by love because of the Great Peace, the Great Renewal, and the Great Sacrifice. The Great Commission is the Whole Commission as it engages in evangelism, peacemaking, and stewardship—reconciliation as mission. The mission of the church is to participate with God in the reconciliation of ALL things in Christ; it is to practice the Whole Commission in Jesus's name and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now more than ever before, the church needs to wage reconciliation upon the earth, until Christ returns.