

Chapter 1

GOD is Pre-eminent

Divine Pre-eminence and Initiative

We begin this book by first and foremost affirming the priority and supremacy of the One and Only GOD who, in the Person of the Father, decided to save us by sending Christ, the Son and His Gospel, by the Holy Spirit. All creation, all salvation, are rooted in His will and design. This is the vital cosmic perspective of the Great Commission and the call for true discipleship. It is not only a mission and a task for the Church to fulfill. It is how the triune GOD brings us out of darkness into His wonderful light. He is thereby redeeming and transforming us from our fallen humanity to receive the sinless humanity of Christ. This cosmic scope and scale of the Great Commission that is almost unnoticed, unknown, or untreated, when we seek to fulfill it.

All of true discipleship is rooted in Christ and the Great Commission that He has commanded His Church to fulfill. Therefore we want to start by addressing the supremacy of Christ and the fundamental significance of His Great Commission for true discipleship. His supremacy and commission is the foundation of the whole of this book.

The focus and purpose of this book is to proclaim true discipleship as taught in the Bible. True discipleship is rooted in the Great Commission that Christ has commanded for the Church. As I affirm that obeying the Great Commission is founded on the cosmic purpose and design of GOD, I want to cover this fundamental aspect that is hardly covered by books on this matter. My aim is to draw, as accurately, as relevantly, as possible from the revelation of Scripture what applies to Christian discipleship and living. It is nothing less than the core of how GOD is redeeming and transforming humankind through the Gospel and the Church for Christ's return! It needs to be grasped within the biblical revelation as a whole, not as a compartmentalised topic. This involves theology because theology has to do with our receiving, comprehending and obeying the revelation from GOD that He has given us. He and His revelation are infallible. While our reception, comprehension and obedience are fallible, it is essential to our relationship and walk with Him that we engage in this process to embody and live out His truth. We need to be so engaged to work under His grace to learn from Him, and be moulded and transformed by Him.

However, this book is not a work on theology. That is a different kind of writing and subject matter which I will explore in other books. Yet, given the spiritual and theological root of the matter, we certainly need to base our work on sound biblically founded theology. So a theological introduction is an apt setting and beginning. This book seeks to grasp and lay out how, as the Church obeys the Great Commission to be disciples who make disciples, Christ is transforming us by the Spirit to be like Him, to the glory of the Father.

The Supreme CHRIST of the GOSPEL

It is utterly vital that we do not mistake that discipleship is simply or primarily a matter of our commitment and effort to follow Him. This is a serious and widespread misconception that I want to address from the start. No! We are not the centre of discipleship or disciple-making. Everything starts and ends with GOD and is centred and founded on Him. Our commitment and effort cannot amount to anything except for His grace in giving us the responsibility and the scope to choose how we respond to Him. He can sovereignly condemn us or save us without our input. For we are His creation and what becomes of us can only be by His design and determination. This was Paul's point in Ro 9:6-29 on GOD's choice of Isaac and Jacob as the ones He chose to bless even before they were born. GOD is sovereign in choosing who He wants to be His channel of salvation. We have no right, no authority, no power, no position, to demand anything of Him. It is not by human desert, or human preference, or human attainment. It is entirely by His own design. Correspondingly, who and what we are, what we can or cannot do, are entirely by His design and will.

Divine sovereignty means that if GOD has deemed that we are to be condemned for our sins, we would be justly condemned. But this would mean that humankind, having already sinned, can

only await death and destruction without possibility of escape or relief. If He has deemed to save us even though we sin, we would be saved. But then we would be saved even though we are evil. Hence right or wrong, good or bad, would have no significance. But Scripture reveals that neither of these are His design or way. He has chosen, instead, to pay for our sins by sending Christ to die and resurrect for us. In so doing, He opens to us the option, the scope, or the space, to make our own choice for or against what He has done for us in Christ. This means that, by His design, our choice for right or wrong, good or bad, carry fundamental eternal consequences. He has deliberately put this choice within our reach. He has thereby given humanity moral and spiritual character, like Him, albeit finitely. It becomes our responsibility, to choose one or the other. He has made it so that our choice determines our own eternity. The possibility of doing so only exists because Christ has paid for our sins. He makes it so that our repentance from sin and surrender to Him is what allows us to be pardoned, cleansed and saved. Thus we can only be saved in Christ. There is no other way and no other person by which we can be saved. The enormous cost of paying for our sins is borne by Christ for us. His paying this cost reveals to us His immeasurable gracious love for us. The costliness of His doing so underscores the value of righteousness and truth for us and for eternity. The Father is saying that our righteousness is worth the life of His Son, Jesus Christ.

The Bible tells us that GOD the Father has sent His Son to be born as a sinless man, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ (He 2:14-18; 4:14-15). This is so that He can then die on the cross as GOD's payment for our sins. He alone can do so. He has no sin to die for. Hence He can die for our sins. No one else can do so because there is no other sinless human being. We can only die to pay for our own sins. We cannot die to pay for anyone else's sin. This is what Christ did on the cross in obedience to the Father, as His willing and voluntary act for our salvation. Yet Satan and death could not hold Him, because He is sinless. So the Father and the Spirit raised Him from the dead (1Co 6:14; Ro 8:11). Jesus resurrected to eternal life. He did not simply come back to this life that we have on earth. He resurrected to a life that is the GOD-intended GOD-given life that humankind were meant to have, until our sin took it away from us. Eternal life is not just about living forever. It is a qualitatively different life from the fallen biological life we have in this corrupted world. It is the kind of life humankind was meant to have that is sinless and lived in full communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1Jn 5:11-12; Re 21:22-25; 22:17). The resurrection of Christ from the dead ensures that all who believe in Him and worship Him as Lord and GOD, in rejection of sin, will receive and live this kind of life (Ac 2:37-39; 1Co 15:1-4; Ro 10:9-13).

Eternal life begins in the believer at the point of Christ giving the person the Holy Spirit to live in him or her (Ep 1:13-14). He does this when one makes a genuine decision to repent of sin and surrender to Him as Lord. It grows through obedience and dies through disobedience. It is the one who keeps faith until the end of his or her life, or until Christ returns, who is assured of eternal life beyond this life forever (He 3:12-14; Mt 24:13).

What GOD has done in and through Jesus Christ is the power of GOD to save (Ro 1:16). The message of the Gospel is a declaration of this truth. It is this truth and act of GOD that saves, not the message as a mere piece of information. Hence the response to the Gospel cannot be mere intellectual assent. It has to be an act of faith in believing that what GOD has done in Christ is true and fully effective. It has to be an act of the will to choose to reject sin and evil and to surrender to Christ as Lord and GOD, and so obey Him in worship. This is an act that is to be upheld for life. It cannot be a temporary or momentary thought or act that is thereafter forgotten, neglected, ignored or set aside. It is a once-and-for-all decision not in the sense that if one does it just once in one's life, one is immune to judgement. It is once-and-for-all in the sense that it is a decision that, once made, is upheld thereon for all of one's life (Ro 6:8-11).

The Good News is GOD's Power to Save

This Gospel is the good news that the Church is called to declare to the world. Yet, as noted above, it is vital to understand that it is not just a matter of passing on or receiving a piece of information. Correspondingly, the response to the Gospel cannot be mere intellectual and mental assent. It cannot be just a nod to having received a bit of information. This is a serious

oversimplification and misconception. It leads to lip service and apathy. Rather, it is what GOD has done, as proclaimed by the news, that saves. Paul makes it very clear in Ro 1:16-17 that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the “power” of GOD to save, for Jews or Gentiles. The power of GOD is effected by what He did through Christ in dying and rising for us (1Co 15:1-3). Thus the way to receive GOD’s salvation in Christ calls for a heartfelt response to worship GOD, to believe and gratefully receive, what He has done for us, as proclaimed by the Gospel. This is what Ro 10:8-13 tells us. The receiver needs to believe and respond to the love and cost of GOD’s action in sending Christ to die and rise again for him or her. The person needs to honestly accept that he or she is a sinner under judgement and in need of salvation. He or she needs then to repent from sin and evil and surrender to Christ, hence to the Father, as Lord, to receive His forgiveness and cleansing. This means making a genuine decisive choice to put one’s life firmly under His charge and to worship and obey Him alone. This is the call of discipleship. This is how we receive the “power” that saves us.

Even the capacity to choose whether or not to accept Christ is by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is the One who convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgement (Jn 16:8-11). Without knowing and believing these truths, one has no sense of the need to repent. He is the One who enables anyone who is willing to surrender to Jesus Christ to confess Him as his or her Lord and GOD. No one can receive the Gospel except by the Holy Spirit. While the choice belongs to the human responder, it is the Spirit who frees us from the deceptions and hold of sin, the world and the devil, and convicts us of what the truth is, that allows us that choice. A person who knows the truth may choose to accept or reject it. It is not compulsion. It is not cause and effect. It is enabling. Without the Spirit’s enabling, no one can be saved. But one so enabled by the Spirit may choose to accept or reject. When one chooses Christ, the Holy Spirit puts it into effect. Hence “no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit” (1Co 12:3b).

Beyond the possibility of receiving Christ by accepting the Gospel, this Gospel needs to be proclaimed by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even the unction to be able to proclaim it is by Christ’s divine command and enabling, as in Mk 16:15 and Ro 10:14-17. The obedient proclaimer of the Gospel is a human channel through whom GOD, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, works to reach out with His love and power to save those who will receive Him and His Gospel. Before the human party can even begin, one must have first received the Gospel for oneself. We must first be a recipient of salvation before we can be used by Him to save others. He enacts His power to save by putting the Gospel into the heart and mouth of faithful witnesses to declare what He has done by testifying to the good news. The one who shares this Gospel needs to do so by faith and obedience, working under the authority of Christ and seeking the leading and enabling of the Holy Spirit living within (Mt 28:18; Ac 1:8).

Once one makes the choice to reject sin and surrender to Christ as one’s Lord and GOD, Jesus seals such a one with the Holy Spirit (Ep 1:13-14). Because the Spirit lives in us, the presence, wisdom and power of GOD is available to enable us to do what we cannot do on our own when we humbly call on Him. It is the call of the dependent on the One who is utterly trustworthy and faithful. This means that we are not left alone and limited to our own resource and capability to uphold our choice. Indeed Scripture abounds with many lessons, many exhortations, many examples of people in real life, who call upon the Name of the Lord to save them, and to enable them to triumph over many obstacles and opposition, that would have otherwise overwhelmed them. The willingness and commitment to call upon the Lord for His help is itself a substantial expressions of one’s true surrender and commitment to Him, and of one’s rejection of all sin and evil. Unwillingness to do so, is symptomatic of wanting to be independent of Him, wanting to go it on our own without Him. If one persists in this way as one’s firm choice, it is a willful rejection of His godhead, lordship and salvation by deed; irrespective of what one may say with one’s mouth.

GOD SAVES, Not Us

In Co 1:5b-6, we find that Paul clearly ascribes the salvation of the Colossians to the power of the Gospel; not to his preaching or to the work of any human agent. The Gospel spreads by its own power, which is GOD’s power, as we explained above. This is a vital corrective to the fairly

widespread misconception that GOD is dependent on our preaching and evangelism for His salvation to succeed. We commit this error whenever we credit the salvation of anyone to our own witness or sharing of the Gospel, or when we attribute to ourselves as having saved someone because we led that person to say the sinner's prayer to receive Christ, or to do some supposedly equivalent act. When someone prays to receive Christ, Christ saves that person; not the one who leads the person to say that prayer. All that one has done, what all of us can only do, is to introduce the person to Christ, or Christ to the person. It is Christ who saves, never ever ourselves. We commit the same error when we attribute our own, or somebody's salvation, to the preaching of some preacher or evangelist. The truth is no human being, no Christian, no preacher, or evangelist, or prophet or apostle, can save. Salvation is GOD's act and GOD's alone.

Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, preachers, and all Christians, share the Gospel as servants of Christ in obedience to His lordship and command. We are His messengers and vessels. We only convey what comes from Him. None of us saves. GOD - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - saves through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We obey because we are ourselves recipients of the Gospel. If we have not done so, we will not be proclaiming it. It is because we are saved in receiving the Gospel that we are given the role in Christ to be His witnesses. We proclaim the Gospel as our role in serving Christ. We are only messengers and witnesses. We are not saviours in any sense. All salvation, the salvation of anyone, can only be attributed to our GOD through what He has done, as declared by the Gospel.

Similarly, we tend to attribute the starting of a new congregation as the work of some preacher or team that preached the Gospel and formed that church. But if there is any genuine salvation in Christ, it is the work of the Holy Spirit through the human channel. Any church or congregation of genuine believers can ever only belong to Christ, not the human channel He used to start it, nor the human leaders He use to lead it. While we should genuinely appreciate the work of the human parties as His servants and agents, they can ever only be instruments of His work of salvation through His Gospel. The Lord and Owner of the Church is always Jesus Christ. Salvation comes from GOD not from man. If anyone comes to Christ when we preach the Gospel, it is because of the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of Christ, and the grace of the Father. We can only be His channel. We are neither the source, nor the creator, nor the power. If it is true that a congregation belongs to a human person or group in their own right, it does not belong to Christ and is not saved in Him! If a human person or group claims ownership over a body of true believers, they are usurping the rightful place of Christ as Lord, GOD and Saviour, and would face His judgement. The true Church can ever only be the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and the People of GOD.

Should one wonder how people can be saved if we do not preach the Gospel, we should take note that GOD's salvation did not begin in the New Testament with the coming of Christ and the preaching of the Gospel. It began as soon as Adam and Eve fell. Right at the time of the Fall, Ge 3:15 records GOD's prophecy that One who is to be born from the seed of woman, who will bruise the serpent's head, will come. This is the first prophecy of Christ. His birth and ministry on earth, His death and resurrection, fulfilled GOD's promise to send Him to save us. Hence GOD acted to save long before humankind realised or acknowledged that He was doing so, or grasped how He would do so. Many in the Old Testament, long before Christ came with the Gospel, were saved. We can name Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, the OT prophets and many others as those who are saved because they responded to GOD in faith. Even with the coming of the Gospel of Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel is only one aspect of GOD's cosmic act of salvation. For GOD's salvation not only covers fallen humankind, but all of creation (2Co 5:19; Mk 16:15; Re 21:1-2). GOD was in Christ reconciling the world, not just human beings, to Himself! The work of the outpoured Holy Spirit, since the Pentecost after Christ's ascension, was not confined to the preaching of the Gospel, but to bringing this world to its end, to prepare for Christ's return, when this heaven and this earth will pass away. Christ will bring with Him the New Heaven and New Earth. In other words, GOD has always been the One who saved. He is the One who acted in countless ways to reach out to us time and time again. The problem has always been that far too many, across all human history, refuse to respond in faith and obedience. Put

simply, with or without our preaching the Gospel, GOD has always been reaching out to any who would seek Him or call upon Him.

If the question is then, why should we preach the Gospel, there are a few layers to the answer. I would like first to identify a major mistaken approach for motivating evangelism. Many preachers, pastors, mission school lecturers and missionaries motivate those they instruct to evangelise on the basis that, unless we do so, people will not be saved. While I truly appreciate the importance of evangelism and the need for Christians to share the Gospel, this is a seriously wrong way of motivation that leads to many errors:

For one thing, it easily leads to a serious misconception that we are doing the saving, we are the saviours. It nurtures the lie that GOD's work of salvation is entirely dependent on whether we do our part or not. From the beginning of this chapter, I have stringently emphasised, on the basis of Scripture, that GOD and GOD alone saves. No human being, not even apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers can save. We can only be His instruments, His servants, for Him to save. This way of motivating Christians to evangelise breaks this vital line of distinction from GOD being the Only Saviour to we becoming saviours. It makes our GOD impotent without us because He cannot save without us. If so, our GOD is dependent on us. How then can He save us?! It looks like He needs us to save Him! This is utterly utterly wrong!

If anyone accepts this misconception, it easily leads to pride and arrogance when we reach out to those with whom we are to share the Gospel. We see ourselves as the all-knowing and all-powerful. Those we reach out to are the know-nothing, the weak and the helpless who need our pity and our superiority. This is a gross distortion of the Gospel. We present ourselves to them as if we are gods, and they are our inferiors, our subjugates, or our slaves. This is in fact a sadly historically accurate account of what has often happened between those who evangelise and those who are evangelised. It has colonialism as its brother! The truth is that we are ourselves sinners saved by His grace. We share only because we ourselves have been saved by GOD's grace and He has sent us out to share His grace with our fellows, our equals. Pride and arrogance severely distorts the truth that He alone saves. It is His grace, His holiness, and His majesty, that we witness to, not our own. We share the Gospel not because we are in any way superior to those we reach out to. We share because we have been saved and He has sent us to share His grace with our fellows, with our peers, who, like us, needs His salvation.

Pride and arrogance may also manifest themselves in a very different way. This is when we think that, unless we are saviours, it is not worth our while to share the Gospel. If we cannot save, so the logic goes, why should we evangelise? If taken seriously, this attitude may amount to saying that if I am not God I refuse to do this work! This is akin to, if not, blasphemy, a rejection of GOD as our Lord because we want to be God ourselves. Less serious, but no less wrong, is to think that since He is the Saviour, not us, let Him do the work. We refuse to be involved. This is a rejection of our role to be His witnesses. This is direct disobedience to His command for us to evangelise. This would be outright rebellion. This is deliberately burying our talent in the ground. Beware that the Lord's warning is that those who do so would be expelled into the outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 25:24-30).

We need to correct this approach and line of thought by taking hold of some key biblical and theological truths:

One point of correction is to note that if GOD is dependent on us in any way, He is no longer an all-powerful GOD, as the Bible says He is. He is as weak as we are because He can only do as much as we can or will do. We become His weakest link so that if we fail He fails. This is totally wrong and utterly mistaken. If it is true, salvation has again become a matter of human effort. It is no longer by faith in Him and His total sufficiency. It is by human works and the extent of our willingness or ability to perform. If GOD is dependent on us to save, we have to do the saving, because He cannot! So what becomes of Christ's death and resurrection, eternal life, and everything that GOD has done to save us? Can it be that, if we do not do our part, GOD has done all that for nothing? Do we have the ability to negate all that He has done by disobedience? If we disobey His command to share the Gospel His work of salvation comes to an end? Is this not utterly ridiculous? Hence, to presuppose that GOD is dependent on our effort to motivate people

to evangelise is utterly fallacious. So this point of view and this way of motivating Christians to evangelise must be abandoned.

Furthermore, if salvation is in fact dependent on us, much of humankind is irretrievably lost due to our ignorance or neglect. How many generations of humanity has lived before Christ came? How many human beings did not hear the Gospel even after He came? How many people can the whole Church reach with the Gospel from here on, even if we do our best? To believe that salvation can only come by our preaching the Gospel is in fact a belief that a vast mass of humanity is irretrievably lost because of the drastic limitations of our reach, even if we try our best. This does not even include the fact that large segments of the Church, through the ages, fail to preach the Gospel. Even for the obedient, we know that we did not begin in obedience, nor are we infallibly obedient. But we have earlier noted that, even in the OT, since the Fall, GOD has saved many who responded in faith to His initiative.

So Why Preach the Gospel?

There are many very good and utterly vital reasons taught in Scripture to preach the Gospel:

Firstly, it is Christ's command. Not to do so, is outright disobedience. Any reason not to is a manifestation of our sinful flesh.

Secondly, He gave this command because He has given us a role as His People, as His disciples, to be His servants to share in His work of salvation. We cannot save but we proclaim Him to people and bring people to Him for Him to save!

Thirdly, because He has given us a role to play in His purpose, His purpose has become our purpose. This is an integral aspect of our personal and collective life purpose in Christ. The Great Commission is our mission in life as Christians and as His Church. To neglect this is to neglect an integral part of our own GOD-given purpose in life.

Fourthly, because it is His command and call for us, it has become our responsibility to Him and to those to whom we can reach with the Gospel. We are accountable to Him and to them to do so. True, we cannot reach everyone. But there are very many within our reach, personally or collectively. Are we reaching them? This is our part in Him! We are accountable to Him and to these people whether we do our part or not.

Fifthly, this is a role that only those who are saved in Christ can do. No one who is not saved, no one who does not believe, no one who is ignorant of GOD or His truth, is in a position to do so. Hence it is our unique privilege and role, as those who are saved in Christ.

In the light of these reasons, not only should we share the Gospel, we should do our best with great joy. But we do so as His obedient children and servants, not as saviours usurping His rightful place. Nor are we some superior class of humanity sharing with inferior human beings. We are all members of humanity who are saved by Christ and saved in Christ. He has graciously given us a role in Him to serve Him by sharing His salvation with our fellow human beings. They share the same need as we do for His love and power to save us all. To obey Christ in so doing is not an assertion of any kind of superiority on our part. It is being true to being a human being saved in Christ to reach out to our fellow humans, our equals and our peers, so that they may receive from Him likewise.