The Great Commission and the apostle Paul are frequently discussed in the field of missiology. The Great Commission found in Matthew 28:18–20 has been identified as one of the Bible’s missionary texts *par excellence.*\(^1\) The apostle Paul has likewise been identified as one of Christianity’s missionaries *par excellence.*\(^2\) In the midst of many works on Paul’s missionary methodology and message in recent years, few have explored in any detail the continuity between Paul’s methods and the Great Commission.\(^3\) The relationship between the apostle Paul and the Great Commission is significant because of its implications for the mission of the church today. Is there continuity between the mission given to the church by Jesus and the mission carried out by the apostle Paul? Does Paul envision the mission of the church in ways that are consistent with the Great Commission? This essay will seek to evaluate the ministry and message of the apostle Paul according to his letters in light of the Great Commission in order to determine how the Great Commission should shape the mission of the church today.

Before turning to the ministry and message of the apostle Paul, we must first survey Matthew’s account of the Great Commission. Jesus’ post-resurrection commission to his disciples can be found at the end of each of the Gospels and in the beginning of the book of Acts. Matthew 28:18–20, however, has come to be identified as the “Great Commission.”\(^4\) Matthew’s account of Jesus’ commission is bracketed by two great Christological truths—the universal authority and the abiding presence of Christ. These two comprehensive promises place the task of the Great Commission not only upon the original disciples but also upon all future generations.\(^5\) Therefore, in light of his power and presence, Jesus commands his followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19).\(^6\) Jesus also explains the means of carrying out this
task by way of three participles: going, baptizing, and teaching. Therefore, the goal of the Great Commission is to “make disciples of all the nations” and the means of carrying out this task are “going” to the nations, “baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit,” and “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.”

This brief structure of Matthew 28:18–20 provides a helpful framework for evaluating the ministry and message of the apostle Paul. Yet many scholars recognize that neither Acts nor Paul’s epistles explicitly identify the Great Commission as a motive in the early church’s missionary endeavors. However, the lack of explicit reference to the Great Commission does not constitute a lack of continuity between Jesus’ command and Paul’s ministry and message. While this essay will not argue for literary dependence between the epistles of Paul and the Gospel of Matthew, it will argue that continuity exists between the goal and the means of the Great Commission in Matthew and Paul’s missionary work as seen in Acts and his letters.

The Goal of the Great Commission

The goal of the Great Commission is seen in the explicit command to “make disciples [μαθητεύσατε] of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). μαθητεύω occurs two other times in Matthew and once in Acts (Matt. 13:52; 27:57; Acts 14:21). A disciple is one who has been trained not only to understand the message of the kingdom of God, but also to teach it to others (Matt. 13:52). Joseph of Arimathea is also described as one “who had been discipled by Jesus” (ἐμαθητεύθη τῷ Ἰησοῦ; Matt. 27:57). Both occurrences in Matthew indicate that discipleship or making disciples is more than just knowledge about Jesus. Discipleship includes submission to Jesus’ reign and helping to extend it.

Germaine to this discussion is the use of μαθητεύω in Acts 14:21. In this passage Luke connects the making of disciples (μαθητεύσαντες) with the preaching of the gospel and the
establishing of local churches by the apostle Paul (Acts 14:21–23). These additional occurrences of μαθητεύω provide a helpful background for understanding Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations.” Carson rightly notes, “Disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey Jesus’ teaching.” To make disciples requires proclaiming the message of the gospel, but also extends beyond merely proclamation. Discipleship includes going to persons who have not heard (“go…”), forming believers into the body of Christ (“baptizing them…”), and instructing them in the faith (“teaching them…”). This picture of discipleship reflects the ministry and message of the apostle Paul as seen in his letters.

**Paul’s Ministry**

Romans 15:14–21 is perhaps one of the most insightful passages concerning Paul’s pattern of ministry. Paul provides a summary of his ministry and in doing so communicates the goal of his ministry. After approximately twenty-five years of ministry, Paul claims, “from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled [πεπλήρωκέναι] the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19), to the degree that he no longer has any room to work in these areas (Rom. 15:23). Having fulfilled the gospel in these regions, Paul communicates his desire for future ministry: “I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20). Paul desired to preach the gospel in Spain in the same way that he “fulfilled the gospel” from Jerusalem to Illyricum.

In what sense has Paul completed the ministry of the gospel? O’Brien lists three possible answers to this question. First, the eschatological interpretation sees Paul as uniquely situated within salvation history and his having preached the gospel to the Gentiles from Illyricum to Jerusalem as a fulfillment of bringing in the fullness of the Gentiles in the east (cf. Rom. 11:25). The weakness of this interpretation lies in its entirely future eschatological orientation.
states, “For Paul the most decisive event of the last days, viz. the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, had already occurred and this was determinative for his own life and mission.”17 In other words, Paul was “visibly and distinctly working from an eschatological event rather than towards one.18

Second, the dynamic preaching of the gospel interpretation argues “fulfilling the gospel” has more to do with the manner in which Paul carried out his mission—“by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God” (Rom. 15:18–19). While Paul certainly sought to proclaim the gospel dynamically by the power of the Spirit (cf. 1 Thess. 1:5–6), his focus here is not on the manner in which he carried out his mission but the end goal of it. Third, the ecclesiastical interpretation argues that “fulfilling the gospel” focuses on the scope of Paul’s missionary activity, which included primary evangelism, the nurture of emerging churches, and their firm establishment as congregations. Bowers summarizes this position by stating, “Paul’s missionary vocation finds its sense of fulfillment in the presence of firmly established churches.”19 This identification would include churches such as the ones at Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. For Paul, the completion of the gospel ministry in these areas went beyond initial evangelism of individuals and extended to the establishing of churches for the furtherance of the gospel in those areas.20

Paul also communicates the ongoing goal of his ministry as preaching the gospel where Christ has not yet been named. It is often assumed from Paul’s statement in Romans 15:20 that he viewed the goal of his ministry primarily in terms of evangelism. However, the ecclesiological understanding of what it means to “fulfill the gospel” should not be ignored when determining what Paul meant by his desire to “preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation” (Rom. 15:20). This desire most certainly
included initial evangelism in these new areas, but this delimitation was not the totality of Paul’s understanding of his ministry.

Bowers rightly points out, “The vocation of evangelic proclamation was for Paul a larger complex than evangelism. For him it was a mission that embraced evangelism within an ecclesiological intention.” Paul’s goal aimed at the strengthening of believers and the establishing of local churches. While Paul did not stay to pastor the churches he planted, the goal of his ministry was not merely the planting of these churches but also the watering of them. In this way Paul’s ministry demonstrates continuity with Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all the nations” not only by aiming at bringing people into relationship with Christ, but by seeing to it that they live under the Lordship of Christ. This work, according to Paul, was carried out through establishing local churches in which believers were able to grow into mature disciples. Paul’s concern with maturity is also seen in his teaching throughout his letters.

**Paul’s Message**

In a summary statement of the goal of his preaching, Paul states, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). In the broader context, Paul outlines his calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles as a servant of the church (Col. 1:25). Paul views his primary task as the proclamation of the gospel. The goal of his proclamation is “to make the word of God fully known” (Col. 1:25). Literally, his aim is “to fulfill the word of God” (πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ; cf. Rom. 15:19).

In Romans, Paul saw the fulfilling of the gospel in terms of the establishment of Christian communities in which further ministry would continue. In Colossians, Paul explains the fulfilling of the word of God in terms of establishing the Colossian church as a body of mature disciples.
His overarching concern is that those who trust in Christ would grow up in Christ. Paul’s goal was certainly not less than evangelism. Rather, it included evangelism but with a view to its broader goal—“to present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28; cf. 4:12). This type of maturity takes places through “warning” (νουθετοῦντες) and “teaching” (διδάσκοντες) within the context of community (cf. Col. 3:16). This latter point is demonstrated by virtue of Paul’s writing his letter to the church at Colossae. Furthermore, Paul’s later instruction in the book is directed towards the church as a whole (cf. Col. 3:5–17). Paul’s concern with the maturity of believers reflects the task of making disciples as seen in the Great Commission.

Whereas Paul describes his and his co-workers’ aim in preaching the gospel in Colossians 1:24–29, he describes local church’s goal in ministry in Ephesians 4:11–16. Using language similar to Colossians, Paul lays out the task of both the leaders and the members within the local church. In the broader context (vv. 7–16), Paul discusses how the different gifts given by God to each member are for the sake of the whole body.

In Ephesians 4:11–12, Paul describes the leaders of the church as gifts given for the building up of His body. Of particular importance are the gifts of pastors and teachers. This concept is expressed by three prepositional phrases: “to equip the saints” (πρός τὸν καταρτισμὸν τῶν ἁγίων), “for the work of ministry” (εἰς ἔργον διακονίας), and “for building up the body of Christ” (εἰς οἰκοδομὴν τοῦ σώματος τοῦ Χριστοῦ). The relationship between these phrases is important for understanding the nature of ministry that Paul advocates in the local church. It seems most likely that the preposition πρός modifies the main verb in v. 11 (“he gave,” ἔδωκεν) and expresses why God gave church leaders to the church—for the purpose of equipping the saints. The change in prepositions from πρός to εἰς indicates a shift of focus from the church leaders to the “saints” they are supposed to equip.
Thus, the saints are equipped to do the work of the ministry. The last preposition (εἰς) is dependent on the previous two phrases together. Both the equipping of the saints and the exercising of their gifts is “for building up the body of Christ.” While the “building up” envisioned here seems to be primarily internal or intensive, it does not exclude an external or extensive building of the church through adding to its number. What is the end goal of this process? The preaching of the gospel and the teaching of believers was all towards one goal—maturity in Christ, “to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (4:13). Maturity, much like a “disciple” in the Gospel of Matthew, is defined in relation to Christ. Mature disciples are persons who have come to know Christ, have progressively become more like Christ, and will finally attain the fullness of Christ in the age to come. According to Paul, mature disciples are made and grow in and through the ministry of the local church. The means by which this goal is accomplished, according to Paul, largely reflects what is laid out in the Great Commission.

The Means of Fulfilling the Great Commission

Going

The participle πορευθέντες is an attendant circumstance, which in this case means it functions as an imperative. Thus, it is best translated, “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations.” Jesus’ reference to “all the nations” should be understood as including both Jews and Gentiles within the universal mission of the church. Carson concludes, “The aim of Jesus’ disciples, therefore, is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction.” The act of “going” was certainly not optional since the command was to make disciples of all the nations. This idea fits nicely into the pattern Paul establishes in his ministry. In order for the Great
Commission to be fulfilled someone must go to all the nations to make disciples of all the nations.

**Going & Paul’s Ministry**

The scope of Paul’s ministry reflects the scope of the Great Commission—“all the nations.” Paul’s understanding of his mission to all the nations is evident in the course he took in his missionary travels. In fact, the book of Acts demonstrates Paul’s commitment to “go” to all the nations. Paul’s ministry extended to Damascus, Arabia, Jerusalem, Syria, Cilicia, Antioch, Southern Galatia, Pamphylia, Macedonia, Achaia, Ephesus, Illyricum, Judea, Rome, Spain, and Crete. Paul’s ministry in these places included Jews and Gentiles. Paul’s mission reflected the universal undertaking outlined in the Great Commission. In his own words, Paul states, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). What motivated Paul to go to all the nations becoming all things to all people? Again, in his own words, he notes, “I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:23). For Paul, the message of the gospel determined the extent to which he must go and to which the church must go in order to fulfill the Great Commission.

**Going & Paul’s Message**

In Paul’s message, the focus is not so much on the “going” of the messenger, but on the “going” of the message. The message of the gospel is presented as a dynamic force in Paul’s letters. The gospel, Paul reminds the Corinthians, did not originate with them, nor are they the only ones to whom it has reached (cf. 1 Cor. 14:36). Furthermore, the gospel is depicted as arriving in Thessalonica: “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5). In addition, the gospel is said to have “come” to the Colossians and is “growing” and “bearing fruit” both among the Colossians and
“in the whole world” (Col. 1:5–7). Paul’s ministry is bound up with the advance of the gospel. In all of these passages Paul’s missionary activity is stated in terms of the activity of the gospel. For Paul, the necessity of the advance of the gospel determined the “going” of his missionary activity. This understanding was not only true of Paul’s missionary activity, but also was his expectation for the church as well.

Just as the gospel was active through the work of the apostle Paul, it was also active through the church. In 1 Thessalonians 1:8 Paul states that the word of the Lord “has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has become known so that we have no need to speak about it.” Plummer convincingly argues that this statement refers to the Thessalonians’ evangelistic proclamation. First, the “word of the Lord” is generally understood to refer to the message of the “gospel” rather than personal testimony in Acts and Paul’s epistles (cf. Acts 8:25; 13:44, 48, 49; 15:35, 36; 16:32; 19:10, 20; 2 Thess. 3:1). Second, the verb “sounded forth” (ἐξήχητα), while appearing only here in the New Testament, is elsewhere used to describe “a clap of thunder” (Sir. 40:13), “the loud cry of a multitude” (Philo, In Flaccum 39), or “a rumor that runs everywhere” (3 Macc. 3:2).

Without importing all of these meanings into the occurrence of ἐξήχητα in 1 Thessalonians 1:8, it can be argued that Paul envisions the “ringing out” or “sounding forth” of the gospel as part of the Thessalonians’ evangelistic labor (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3). Plummer concludes, “As the ‘word of the Lord’ has progressed effectively through the apostle Paul, now it was advancing through the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 1:8; 2:13–14; 2 Thess. 3:1).” In other words, the church is the “launching point for the gospel.” The message of the gospel, according to Paul, seems to ensure the “going” of the church to the nations.
A second key text in Paul’s epistles is Romans 10:13–15. In the broader context (9:30–10:21), Paul is addressing Israel’s culpability for rejecting Christ. In making this argument, Paul explains the logic of salvation. While Paul addresses Israel in the larger context, here he generally references both Jews and Gentiles (cf. Rom. 10:12). While Paul’s focus in this passage is not on missions per se, its relevance to the discussion should be noted. Paul begins by stating, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom. 10:13). This declaration serves as the climax of the chain in vv. 14–15.

Paul explains the logic of salvation using four rhetorical questions, concluding with its foundational element. People cannot call upon the Lord without believing, they cannot believe without hearing, they cannot hear without someone preaching, and no one will preach unless they are sent. In summary, Paul argues that salvation is not possible apart from the preaching of the gospel.

Hearing the gospel, as was the case with Israel, does not ensure that one will believe the gospel (Rom. 10:16). Believing the gospel “entails whole-hearted commitment to God.” The entire process, though, hangs on the sending of someone to preach. The progress of the gospel, according to Paul, requires someone to go and preach the gospel. Plummer concludes, “Although Paul often chooses not to stress the human agents through whom God’s word progresses, it is noteworthy that for Paul such progression inevitably entails the proclamation and hearing of the gospel.” In these two passages, the gospel ensures the “going” of God’s people to those who have yet to hear, to all the nations. This belief makes up an essential part of the mission of the church and is consistent with the means of fulfilling the Great Commission.
Baptizing

In Matthew’s account of the Great Commission, “baptism” indicates entrance into the new community of believers and submission to the Lordship of Christ. Baptism is to be done “into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). The preposition “into” (εἰς) has the idea of identification. Carson argues that it “strongly suggests a coming-into-relationship-with or a coming-under-the-Lordship-of.” Since the participle “baptizing” indicates the means of “making disciples,” it is clear that the act of baptism is for persons who have willingly identified themselves as followers of Christ.

While Jesus’ words mark the significance of baptism for the mission of the church, it is interesting that there is little sustained discussion concerning the topic through Paul’s letters. This lack of emphasis does not mean Paul considered it irrelevant. While his ministry was not marked by a great stress on baptism, his message contains essential truth that connects carrying out of this element of the Great Commission through the ministry of the local church.

Baptizing & Paul’s Ministry

Paul’s letters include very little information about his practice of baptizing new believers. In fact, 1 Corinthians 1:13–17 is the only explicit text that deals with Paul’s practice of baptism. In the Corinthian church, Paul was attempting to downplay the significance of persons who perform the baptism. The Corinthian church had elevated various leaders to such a degree that it was causing division in the church. Paul’s was concerned this division was taking away their focus from what was most important—the message of the cross. Lest the Corinthian believers start claiming to have been “baptized into the name of Paul,” he put baptism in its proper place (1 Cor. 1:13). Schreiner states, “Baptism was important to Paul. It must be understood, however, in light of the gospel, so that the gospel (and not baptism) receives priority.”
This understanding does not downplay the significance of baptism, but rather contributes to what Paul envisioned as the goal of his ministry—the preaching of the gospel and the establishing of local churches in which believers could grow into mature disciples. First, Paul’s distinction between proclaiming the gospel and the act of baptism demonstrates the priority of gospel proclamation in his ministry. In fact, Paul states, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17). Paul’s practice of ministry demonstrates that he did not see baptism as effecting salvation. Such was the work of the gospel, “the word of the cross.” As we will see in Paul’s teaching, baptism is not of primary importance like the gospel, but it is the natural response of those who have believed in the gospel message.

Second, Paul’s approach to baptism reflects his commitment to the local church and its leaders. While Paul only baptized a few new believers in Corinth (Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanus), some of these new believers became leaders in the church and were, it would seem, charged with baptizing the others (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15). Furthermore, as Paul will make clear, baptism marks the believers’ conversion and their inclusion in the body of Christ.

**Baptizing & Paul’s Message**

The relationship between baptism and the goal of Paul’s mission seen in his ministry is further expressed in his message. In the New Testament, the discussion of baptism is associated with conversion. This suggestion is true in Paul’s letters as well. He often places greater emphasis in his letters on conversation itself than on the act of baptism. Furthermore, it is not often clear whether Paul’s references to baptism always include the idea of water baptism (see Rom. 6:3–4; 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:5; Col. 2:11–12). It seems best to say that even when “water” baptism is not directly referenced, it serves as an outward marker of the inward
realities experienced in conversion. For Paul, the imagery and act of baptism is used to express the believers’ conversion and their inclusion into the body of Christ.

First, baptism signifies the believer’s conversion through union with Christ. Paul believed baptism is a symbol of the believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–4; Col. 2:11–12). The emphasis is upon the completed work of Christ, which by faith has been applied to the believer (i.e., conversion). In fact, the believer shares in all the benefits of Christ’s completed work. In both Romans and Colossians, Paul emphasized the believers’ union with Christ has broken the power of sin and freed them to live new lives in Christ.

The purpose behind the believers’ union with Christ is “in order that . . . we too might walk in newness life” (Rom. 6:4). The believer’s union with Christ is the only thing able to stop “the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:23) and enable the believer to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1). It would be appropriate to conclude, “Jesus gave his disciples the command to baptize new converts (Matt. 28:19), and here Paul gives us the theology of baptism: it is a picture of the believer’s death to sin and his new life in Christ.”

Second, baptism also signified the believer’s inclusion into the body of Christ, including his reception of the Spirit. For example, in 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul states, “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” In this context, Paul is dealing with the identity of the body of Christ, in particular “how the many of them, diverse as they are, are in fact one body.” The key aspect to the believers’ identity and unity is their common reception of the Holy Spirit. This action takes places at conversion, in which the believer is immersed in the Spirit. Paul uses the metaphor of baptism to express this point, but does not explicitly refer to water baptism.
baptism follows after Spirit baptism, which takes place at conversion, and serves a sign of the believer’s union with Christ and unity in the body of Christ.

Also, Paul attaches baptism to the believer’s inclusion in the body of Christ in Ephesians 4:5. In Ephesians 4:1–3 Paul calls the church to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord,” of which maintaining “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” is a vital aspect. As a ground for this unity, Paul teaches that there is “one baptism.”\(^{43}\) Schreiner states, “Paul can appeal to baptism as a mark of unity in Ephesians 4:5 because it was a given that all his converts were baptized at conversion.”\(^{44}\) Baptism serves as a ground for unity in the church because it indicates persons who make up the local church.

The theology of baptism seen in Paul’s letters helps shed light on its importance and place in the church’s mission. Baptism points back to the believer’s union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Baptism points forward to the believer’s inclusion into the body of Christ. In this way it serves to highlight Paul’s goal of proclaiming the gospel and establishing churches. A person is not saved by baptism, but people who believe the gospel are to be baptized. Believers who are baptized make up the local church, and Paul sees the local church as the context for making mature disciples. Thus, baptism, according to Paul, is integral to making disciples in the context of the local church as it seeks to carry out the Great Commission.

**Teaching**

The final participial phrase characterizing the means of fulfilling the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20 is “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The role of teaching in the Great Commission has several important implications. First, teaching emphasizes the importance of the ongoing process of discipleship. Disciples are not only brought into the church through baptism, but they are built up through teaching and instruction. Second, this
instruction is not merely transferring information, but includes instruction with a view towards obedience—“teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you” (emphasis added). Third, this aspect of making disciples ensures the ongoing work of the Great Commission. Teaching new believers “everything” that Jesus commanded would certainly include teaching them the Great Commission itself. Thus, teaching rounds out the picture of what it means to “make disciples.”

Teaching & Paul’s Ministry

Paul saw his ministry, at least in part, as a teaching ministry. This idea does not negate the primacy of proclaiming the gospel for Paul. It demonstrates, however, that Paul’s ministry did not stop with gospel proclamation. Rather Paul’s ministry aimed to establish believers as mature disciples within the context of the local church. This goal requires both preaching the gospel and teaching those who believe it.

In Colossians 1:28 Paul shows that the means by which he accomplishes his goal of making mature disciples is through “teaching” (διδάσκοντες) and “warning” (νουθετοῦντες). Much like Jesus’ instruction to the disciples (Matt. 28:20: “teaching them everything that I have commanded you”), Paul’s view of teaching is comprehensive as demonstrated by his emphatic repetition of “all”—“teaching everyone and admonishing everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col 1:28, emphasis added).

First, the scope of Paul’s teaching was comprehensive. It was intended to bring all believers to maturity in Christ. Second, the nature of Paul’s instruction was comprehensive. Paul’s teaching passed along Christian truth and warned against straying from it. This type of teaching must be done “with all wisdom” because of the varied circumstances in which believers are required to live out their faith. Paul believed the means of accomplishing his desired goal of
presenting everyone mature in Christ included preaching the gospel and teaching believers the Scriptures. Paul saw himself as a “teacher” and the role of “teaching” as vital in establishing and strengthening the local church (1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11).

The importance of teaching or ongoing discipleship is clearly seen in Paul’s ministry by his continual revisiting of churches, his writing of letters, and his sending of co-workers.46 First, Paul’s practice of revisiting churches is a key characteristic of his ministry. This habit is particularly seen in the book of Acts. Paul’s aim in revisiting these churches can be summed in one word: “strengthening” (ἐπιστηρίζω; Acts 14:22, 15:41; 18:22). The pattern of Paul’s ministry indicates that this strengthening took place through teaching or instructing from God’s Word (cf. Acts 18:11; 20:18–20, 27, 31; 28:11). This type of “strengthening” was not an afterthought of evangelism for Paul, but was integral to “making disciples.” Even Paul’s letters express his desire to visit and revisit churches for the sake of their being established in the faith (cf. Rom. 1:11; 1 Cor. 16:5–9; 2 Cor. 1:15–16; 1 Thess. 2:17–20).

Second, Paul not only revisited the churches he established, but he wrote letters to strengthen them further in their faith. “Paul’s letter writing, then, demonstrates his concern for the on-going growth of the churches he planted. His goal was not merely to plant churches and let them loose, regardless of the consequences. Rather, Paul wisely maintained a healthy on-going relationship with his churches so that the work of the gospel continued to flourish.”47 In continuity with the Great Commission, Paul’s letters involved teaching disciples from the Scriptures to walk in obedience in every area of life. His teaching emphasized the local church and encouraged believers to share their faith with others.

Third, Paul also frequently sent co-workers to churches he had established in order to strengthen them in their faith. Perhaps one of the most prominent examples is Timothy. Paul
entrusted Timothy with ministry in Berea, Thessalonica, Macedonia, Corinth, Ephesus, and possibly Philippi. Delegates, such as Timothy, “did not simply complete the next stage of mission work after the Apostle Paul finished. Rather, they were an extension of Paul’s mission work itself.”

Paul’s letters to Timothy while in Ephesus demonstrate the importance of teaching to Paul’s mission work (1 Tim. 1:5; 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:1–5). In fact, Paul’s letters make clear that the teaching characteristic of his ministry was meant to be carried on by the church and its leaders.

**Teaching & Paul’s Message**

Paul’s ministry of teaching was not exclusive to himself. Paul’s letters demonstrate the importance of teaching in the life of the church. This priority applies to everyone within the church, not just its leaders. First, teaching is the general responsibility of every member of the church. In Colossians Paul argues the church is to carry out the same type of ministry he did while among them. In Colossians 1:28, Paul described his ministry as involving both “warning” (νουθετοῦντες) and “teaching” (διδάσκοντες) everyone “in all wisdom” (ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ).

In Colossians 3:16, Paul uses these terms to describe ministry among believers in the local church: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching (διδάσκοντες) and admonishing (νουθετοῦντες) one another in all wisdom (ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ), singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” This verse is found in Paul’s description of what it means to put on the “new self” (Col. 3:10). It is not defined in individualistic terms, but rather in corporate terms, putting emphasis on those characteristics that foster community.

Moo emphasizes three points concerning the worship of the church: (1) God’s Word was central to the church’s worship; (2) various types of music were incorporated into the church’s worship (e.g., “songs, hymns, and spiritual songs”); (3) teaching and admonishing were
responsibilities of every member of the church. So, Paul’s command to let the “word of Christ dwell in you richly” should be understood in light of the corporate worship of the church.

The expression of the indwelling message about Christ should be seen in the mutual “teaching” and “admonishing” among members of the church. These participles explicitly cast the ministry of the members of the church in the same pattern as Paul’s ministry. Elsewhere, Paul exhorts believers in the local church to “admonish” other believers who are rejecting his teaching (2 Thess. 3:15) and to “speak the truth in love to one another” (Eph. 4:15). Paul is confident that the believers in Rome are “able to instruct one another” (Rom. 15:14). To use the language of the Great Commission, Paul sees the means of “making disciples” through “teaching” believers to obey God’s Word as being carried in the context of the local church by the members of the local church.

Second, teaching is a distinctive responsibility of the leaders of the local church. Without dismissing the responsibility of all believers to “teach” one another, Paul’s letters emphasize the role of the leaders of the local church in carrying out the ministry of teaching. Beginning with qualifications of overseers, Paul states that an overseer must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). In Titus 1:9, Paul explains that an overseer “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” While Paul does not explicitly spell out the responsibilities of the elder, he makes it clear elders are to “labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17).

Elsewhere, Paul encourages Timothy to “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). The responsibility of the elder as teacher was for the sake of equipping and building up the church (cf. Eph. 4:12–16; 1 Tim. 3:15). “The role of the elder as teacher is important not just for the
health of the church in the present, but also for the growth of the church in the future.”\textsuperscript{51} This responsibility is seen most clearly as Paul urges Timothy to pass on the gospel that has been entrusted to him: “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). In this verse, Paul describes the extension of the church’s mission through the teaching of its leaders. Timothy is to pass on the gospel to “faithful men,” most likely a reference to the elders of the church.\textsuperscript{52} In turn, the elders of the church are to “teach others also.”

The teaching responsibility of the church ensures more than the health of the church, it also advances the mission of the church by multiplying disciples. As Jesus says in the Great Commission: make disciples by teaching them to obey all that I have commanded. Schnabel rightly concludes, “The establishment of local communities of believers fulfilled Jesus’ missionary commission in Matthew 28:19–20 in which he emphasized that the Twelve whom he sent to the nations should ‘make disciples’ and teach them to obey everything that he had commanded them.”\textsuperscript{53}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Evaluating Paul’s ministry and message in light of the Great Commission has shown considerable continuity between the goals and the means of accomplishing the mission of the church. The Great Commission according to Paul, then, aimed at making mature disciples within the context of the local church. Like Matthew, Paul believed disciple-making is about conformity to Christ, which includes both submitting to His authority and extending His kingdom. The means by which this action is carried out are distinctively connected to the local church.

The church must go to the nations with the gospel. Going, according to Paul, was an overflow of the dynamic nature of the gospel. The church must baptize new believers. Baptism,
according to Paul, is the external mark of the believer’s conversion to Christ and inclusion into the local church, the body of Christ. The church must teach believers to obey all that Jesus commanded. Teaching, according to Paul, is essential for the health of the church and the extension of the gospel by the church. Considering the mission of the church from both the perspective of the Great Commission and Paul’s ministry and message provides a robust model for the church today.

Endnotes


6 All Scripture citations are from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise noted.

7 Daniel Wallace argues that πορευθέντες should be seen as an attendant circumstance participle and that βαπτίζοντες and διδάσκοντες should be participles of means (Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 645). In reference to attendant circumstance participles, Wallace explains, “[T]he relative weight in such construction is that a greater emphasis is placed on the action of the main verb than on the participle. That is, the participle is something of a prerequisite before the action of the main verb can occur” (642–43, emphasis original). In this case, the disciples must go into all the nations in order make disciples of all the nations. In this essay, the participle πορευθέντες will be viewed as a component of carrying out the Great Commission.

8 See Grant Osborne, Matthew, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 1098.


14 The word “fulfilled” (πληρόω) can mean, “to fill, make full, fulfill, complete or finish” (BDAG, 670–72). Here it carries the idea of completion.


16 See, ibid., 39–41.

17 Ibid., 40.


21 Bowers, “Fulfilling the Gospel,” 188.

22 See Douglas Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 155.

23 The gifts Paul mentions in v. 11 are “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” in v. 11.


26 Ibid., 596.


29 Ibid., 60–62.


32 Ibid.


34 Plummer, *Paul’s Understanding of the Church’s Mission*, 64.


36 Ibid.


42 See ibid., 179.

43 Fee comments on the relationship between “one faith” and “one baptism” noting, “one baptism [refers] to the common response to the one faith in the waters of baptism” (ibid., 704).

44 Schreiner, *Paul*, 373.


46 This section largely follows the argument made in Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Need for Theological Education in Missions: Lessons Learned from the Church’s Greatest Missionary,” *SBJT* 9.4 (2005): 50–61.

47 Ibid., 55.

48 Ibid., 56.

49 Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 274.

50 Ibid., 290.


52 It seems most likely that the men responsible for faithfully passing on the gospel are the pastors of the local church, “who were repeatedly required to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; cf. the use of ἀνθρώπος in, e.g. 1 Cor. 7:1; Eph 5:31; 2 Tim 3:8) and who had to be able ‘to exhort with healthy doctrine and rebuke those who oppose [it]’ (Titus 1:9)” (William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC 46 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000], 506).