

Introduction

Mitzi J. Smith and Jayachitra Lalitha

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”
(Luke 4:18–19 NRSV)

“We trust that during the entire time you are on earth, you will compel and use your zeal in making the barbarian nations come to know God...not only through edicts and admonitions, but also through force and arms if necessary so that their souls may share in the kingdom of heaven.”
—Pope Clement VII¹

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
(Matt. 28:18–20 NRSV)

Throughout the history of European Christian imperialism’s global conquest and seizure of lands, wealth, and peoples and the concomitant Christian evangelization of the colonized, including in the Americas, the *evangelizing conquest* method prevailed over the *missionary action* approach.² The missionary action approach hoped to appeal to the reason of the natives through convincing arguments so that they would voluntarily become Christians. The violent evangelizing conquest method that dominated foreign missions proposed to gain control over native populations by any means necessary in

1. Luis N. Rivera, *A Violent Evangelism: The Political and Religious Conquest of the Americas* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 218.

2. *Ibid.*, 229.

order to facilitate their conversion to Christianity, and, by extension, the speedy and less complicated dominance and enculturation of colonized lands and peoples.³ Consequently, peoples who refused evangelistic strategies were forced under threat of death to convert to Christianity. European imperialism (and later American colonialism) in partnership with Christian evangelism spread their own tables with the resources of foreign lands, rendering the native people oppressed and impoverished. As Bishop Desmond Tutu has asserted, “They [the missionaries] said ‘let us close our eyes and pray.’ When we opened them, we had the bible, and they had the land.”⁴

Katie Cannon argues in her article “Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade” that Christian imperialism and the Matthean Great Commission as the biblical mandate for European missionaries to take the gospel to foreign lands were two sides of the same coin.⁵ Cannon coined two terms that name and describe the partnership between imperialism and Christian missions. The first term, a *missiologic of imminent parousia*, refers to the connection created between the imminence of the *parousia* (or the Second Coming of Christ) as understood in the Bible and cultural rationale legitimating particular mission strategies of Christian imperialists.⁶ The second term Cannon coined is *theologic of racialized normativity*, which refers to white supremacist ideologies that declared that God ordained Africans and other foreigners as “natural slaves” and whites or Europeans as their “natural masters.”⁷ Based upon this type of ideology, white supremacists declared that true obedience to God or Jesus Christ was demonstrated when Africans submitted to and worked diligently for their masters.

We would also conceptualize a *theologic of normalized othering* and *missiologic pedagogy of perpetual submission* operative more recently in missional activities of fundamentalists and some evangelical Christians with their renewed urgency to fulfill the so-called Great Commission to the untaught (or insufficiently taught) and unsubdued *others*—an urgency that subordinates and ignores real social justice needs but continues to call for pedagogical submission to white Christian norms and ideas. Gospel and evangelization have been essentialized among too many as only or primarily preaching and teaching *the other*. Thus, the Gospel witness as the embodiment or incarnation (the

3. Ibid., 226–28.

4. Steven D. Gish, *Desmond Tutu: A Biography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004), 101.

5. Katie Cannon, “Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no.1 (2008): 127–34.

6. Ibid., 128.

7. Ibid., 130–32.

praxis) of love and social justice is marginalized or ignored. But as Paulo Freire asserts, “There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis.”⁸ Human existence is nourished with “true words” emerging from human dialogue, and true dialogue “cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people.”⁹

This project explores the history, use, and interpretation of the so-called Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; cf. Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:44-49; John 20:19-23; *Didache* 7:1) and its impact as the metanarrative for foreign and domestic missions. In Matt. 28:18-20, Jesus, with the authority of heaven and earth, sent his disciples to teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *All nations*, as the object of teaching, are historically and traditionally the subordinated *other*. Integral to the project of empire building is the colonizing, marginalizing, and othering of conquered nations and peoples. Historically, missionaries in partnership with European colonizers (or vice versa) in the quest to expand their territories, wealth, and power have colonized indigenous peoples, enslaved and shipped them off to foreign shores, demonized their culture, especially their religious beliefs and practices, constructed them as *other* over against their white Christian selves, and imposed upon them white Christian behavioral norms. As we interrogate the Great Commission, we do so recognizing the historical and contemporary presence and vestiges of the empire’s shadows that must be underscored in biblical criticism,¹⁰ and in other critical disciplines. We must ask how the other is viewed and represented.¹¹ We must also ask what is the impact of this gaze and representation on the other, and how is it manifested?

What happens when we read differently, rejecting the dominant culture’s rendering of Matt. 28:18-20 as the guiding hermeneutical lens for understanding and doing missions and missional pedagogy? The Great Commission demands or encourages a passive, banking model of education that does not value dialogue. Certain people, historically white Christians, have been (and in some places and spaces still are) considered the primary and most competent teachers of all others; and many marginalized peoples have been so convinced, worshipping at the altar of white superiority and sacrificing their own agency of critical engagement, self-definition, and cultural identity. Dialogue is deterred and proscribed by persons who consider themselves “the

8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 68.

9. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

10. Fernand Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 130.

11. *Ibid.*, 126.

owners of truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members” are other.¹² When one group reserves for themselves the sole authority to define, name, and order the world, dialogue cannot occur.¹³

The iconic labeling of Matt. 28:18-20 as the Great Commission provided scriptural rationale for the invasion, colonization, and biased teaching of others while compartmentalizing, totally ignoring, or devaluing the humanity and justice rights of others. The Great Commission elevates teaching above alleviating poverty, healing the diseased, sheltering and clothing the poor with dignity, a living wage and affordable decent housing, and being compassionately present for the imprisoned. In fact, some contemporary ministries have and continue to withhold food and clothing from desperate people unless they listen to a sermon.¹⁴ After the Haitian earthquake in 2010, some Christian groups scrambled to reach Haiti to teach Haitians the gospel, even while many crawled from under the rubble praising God.¹⁵ The elevation of the Great Commission above social justice and love might largely explain the plethora or multiplicity of urban churches that fail to address the suffering and poverty around them. Education, especially religious education and evangelization, should be “the practice of freedom,”¹⁶ of social *and* spiritual liberty.

By focusing primarily on teaching and preaching as the realization of the gospel, we create a hierarchical and dualistic class system of teachers and non-teachers; privileged, elite, properly educated white males are anointed/commissioned by the dominant class of privileged, elite, educated white males to go and to mentor and send others, others predominantly like themselves. And the command to love one’s neighbor is only possible if it does not interfere with the Great Commission or loving one’s neighbor is redefined and reconfigured to align with the priority of the Great Commission. The priority Jesus gave

12. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71.

13. *Ibid.*, 69–70.

14. I have known and know of churches and ministries that insist that the homeless and poor sit through an hour-long sermon as a prerequisite for receiving a free meal.

15. Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Haiti earthquake blame game: God or the devil?” January 17, 2010. Online: <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/Religion/post/2010/01/haiti-earthquake-blame-game-god-or-the-devil/1#.Uvqbxu8XfW4>; Arthur Brice, “Many Haitians’ religious faith unshaken by earthquake.” January 19, 2010. Online: <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/18/haiti.earthquake.faiih/index.html>. In my Facebook newsfeed I read posts by some evangelical Christians in which they were recruiting volunteers to go and evangelize Haitians while many were still lying under the rubble.

16. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist. Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 72. See also Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 74.

to the proactive moral behaviors or acts of justice listed at Matt. 25:35-45 is subordinated to the Great Commission. The Great Commission and its emphasis on teaching draws us away from or blinds us to the importance of contexts, social justice, and the significant and diverse ways that other persons, including children, can contribute to the task of spreading the gospel and of being the presence of God in the world. The particular contexts and needs of different peoples are sacrificed in favor of a universal canopy under which an uncritical idolatry of the Great Commission has summoned and hypnotized us.

In this volume, we attempt to critique and raise contextually relevant questions about the Great Commission. What impact does the very conceptualization of the Great Commission have upon those who see themselves as the commissioned and those to whom they are commissioned? Does it promote a mutual humanity or an inhumanity of one toward the other and thus the dehumanization of both the commissioned and his *others*? How does the identification of Matt. 28:18-20 as the Great Commission support the subordination of non-literate peoples to literate peoples, of women to men, of one ethnic people or social class to another ethnic group or socially constructed class, and social justice to teaching? How has the Great Commission (its construction and deployment) emerged from and colluded with imperialism, racism, sexism, classism, casteism, heterosexism, and ageism? What voices are misrepresented or muted and what voices are privileged? Is it possible to discuss and engage in missions in non-oppressive and non-patronizing ways, particularly if we have consented to be wed to a text like Matt. 28:18-20 as a universal metanarrative? Is it even necessary to have such a metanarrative? How has and does the Great Commission limit our geographic or spatial understanding of where or among whom we should do missions? How might contemporary missions be more liberating and reflect the love of God for all God's creation, and what Scriptures might inform and help us accomplish this task? And as Musa Dube asks, "How can postcolonial [or neo-colonial] subjects read the bible without perpetuating . . . a self-serving paradigm of constructing one group as superior to another?" What is our ethical duty?¹⁷

This project is also about uncritical loyalty to religious terms and phrases that we allow to circumscribe our own agency and analytical thinking. We sometimes permit titles/headings, nomenclature, and religious jargon to usurp our privilege, and the necessity, of reading, rereading, and reading again Scripture, listening for God's voice anew. Because they are codified in Bible translations and commentaries, we trust the titles/headings, names, religious

17. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 15.

jargon, and labels constructed by scholars to be our theological and interpretive guides or to constitute, *in nuce*, definitive interpretations that we dare not question or transgress. The codified nomenclature, titles, and religious jargon, stymie any further need of reflection, revision, rereading, or interpretation. We no longer need to think seriously, extensively, or differently about the subject or the text subsumed under the heading or nomenclature, except maybe to reinforce the tradition. The nomenclature, heading, or jargon predominates.

It is difficult to get Bible students to transcend the titles, jargon, or headings that precede and are meant to summarize blocks of texts in their Bibles. They cannot think creatively because they consider the title to be sacred, pure, objective truth that describes how they should read the text. To interrogate the interpretative inscriptions is considered disrespectful to the text or a mark of arrogance; as Christians and students of scripture, they are hermeneutically constrained by embedded titles and nomenclature. Traditional Christian nomenclature becomes sacralized, iconized, and untouchable, except by an authorized few. The hermeneutical dust has settled and students are convinced that we know all we need to know about a story, text, phrase, or idea. A lot of dust has settled on the Great Commission.

In this volume scholars (and nonscholars) in various disciplines, including biblical studies, history, postcolonial criticism, womanist and feminist criticism, art history, missions, and theology, explore some of these issues, questions, and more about the Great Commission. The contributors to this volume are women and men situated geographically, culturally, and intellectually, in Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and Asia. We are teachers and students of religion, pastors, preachers, and missionaries. Our questions, perspectives, and methodologies sometimes overlap, coincide, and/or differ, to varying degrees; all are contextual. The positions we express with respect to the Great Commission differ in some respects, but we agree on the need for critical reflection or interrogation.

PART 1: COLONIAL MISSIONS AND THE GREAT COMMISSION: RE-MEMBERING THE PAST

This volume begins with a group of articles that unearth the much-undisclosed nexus between colonialism and Europe and North American mission projects. Dr. Beatrice Okyere-Manu's essay, "Colonial Mission and the Great Commission in Africa," takes us to the continent of Africa through pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times to reflect upon the activities of the missionaries in Africa driven by the Great Commission. She acknowledges the positive

impact of the missionaries' contribution along with their failures regarding their inability to confront human suffering, abuse, and inequalities against the indigenous Africans. Her suggestions for a postcolonial mission are quite challenging to the extent of embracing a liberating message that will address issues of social justice. She is clear in affirming that "not until our message addresses contemporary social injustices," such as systemic inequalities, poverty, HIV/AIDS, as well as violence against women and children, can we hope to achieve a holistic commission.

Dr. Dave Gosse's essay, "Examining the Promulgation and Impact of the Great Commission in the Caribbean, 1492–1970: A Historical Analysis," delves into the cultural domination of European and later North American missionaries in the process of evangelizing the Caribbean. Gosse unfolds the painful history of how the church in both the British and French colonial Caribbean served the needs of white people without considering the agency of enslaved African people. After the abolition of the slave trade in the nineteenth century (post-emancipation period), the Caribbean church of Africans began to gain autonomy; however, they continued to remain under colonial state. While Protestant missionaries from North America gradually gained popularity over Catholic missions in the twentieth century, race and class stratification became more visible. Pentecostalism and Rastafarianism (in Jamaica) along with Caribbean theology developed as a counterculture of the Protestant missionary agenda. However, Gosse argues that the racial residues of social damage done to the psyche of the people still remain institutionalized. The Caribbean church can become independent of its colonial roots only if "the psyche of its predominantly black and Indian populations is repaired and empowered to truly fulfill the mandate and mission of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Dr. Mitzi J. Smith, in her essay, "US Colonial Missions to African Slaves: Catechizing Black Souls, Traumatizing the Black *Psychē*," discusses how colonial missions propagated a strange coexistence of plantation missions dedicated to evangelizing black Africans and creating submissive slaves. This created a dichotomous African self with a soul to be saved and a body to be enslaved, thereby inflicting trauma on the black *psyche*. She examines slave catechisms exposing how "the Christianizing and/or catechizing of the slaves functioned both as a salve to relieve the Christian conscience sometimes harassed by the evil nature of slavery and as a justification for slavery."

PART 2: WOMANIST, FEMINIST, AND POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISMS AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

This section consists of essays that employ the hermeneutical lenses of womanist, dalit feminist, and postcolonial methodologies for reading and critiquing the Great Commission.

Dr. Jayachitra Lalitha's essay, "The Great Commission: A Postcolonial Dalit Feminist Inquiry," problematizes the absence of women disciples among the recipients of the Great Commission, as well as the vernacular translation of *nations* as *jaathigal*, which means caste groups in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, this Matthean pericope has deepened caste divisions in India, and strengthened an already existing bias against women in the society. Empire and imperialism collaborated with male authority both in colonizing and colonized lands. Colonial missions also ignored the gender dynamic. Lalitha attributes both Jewish particularism and a universalist Great Commission in Matthew as postcolonial. Jesus' confrontation of Jewish authorities who collaborate with Roman imperial powers, along with his insistence of Jewish priority in God's mission, clearly set him against Roman imperial agenda. Further, the narrative of the Great Commission that extends beyond Jews to all nations is yet another postcolonial act. She shows how Brahmanism and patriarchy collaborated with colonialism to push dalit women to the periphery of knowledge production. A postcolonial dalit feminist reading of the Great Commission continues to decolonize the minds of dalit women from the clutches of Brahmanism and patriarchy.

In "Privilege but No Power: Women in the Gospel of Matthew and Nineteenth-Century African American Women Missionaries through a Postcolonial Lens," Dr. Lynne St. Clair Darden attempts to demonstrate, through a "Christian hybrid identity construction," the complexity of cultural negotiations for nineteenth and early twentieth-century African American women missionaries to Africa. Through that cultural framework she critically examines the role of women in the Matthean prologue and epilogue in the context of mission. She powerfully exposes the paradox of African American women missionaries converting the Africans in their homeland to Christian civilization, "a culture that denied, deprived, and disenfranchised the African American." Thus she reveals the complex "identity construct in that the marginalized often mimic the imperial ideological processes and practices of the dominant society." The women fall in line with the imperial ideology of the text so that the exploitative sociopolitical tactics of empire are transferred into the "Christian mission of negating gender egalitarianism."

Dr. Mitzi J. Smith in her essay, “Knowing More than is Good for One’: A Womanist Interrogation of the Matthean Great Commission,” challenges the dominant perspective for reading Matthew and Mathew’s Jesus through the lens of teaching. She interrogates how the exaltation of teaching has subordinated acts of social justice in Matthew. As a womanist iconoclast, Smith interrogates the Great Commission as “constructed, oppressive epistemic iconography.” Her use of a womanist lens privileges black women’s experiences and ways of knowing or epistemologies. Smith shifts attention from Jesus as paradigmatic teacher of passive recipient nations to Jesus as *God with us*. “As God with us, in Jesus social justice and teaching do not strive for mastery over each other and are not at war in his incarnate body. But Jesus’ practice of social justice and teaching organically constitute the interactive presence of God with us.”

PART 3: THEOLOGY, ART HISTORY, AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

Dr. Sheila F. Winborne in her essay, “Images of the Jesus in Advancing the Great Commission,” moves beyond the traditional claims of Christian colonial art as visually portraying the Sacred to how such images have manifested power and political control within and outside of the church. Winborne argues that the visual arts, specifically renderings of a white Christ, have played a significant role in impacting and imaging Christian beliefs and practices. The projection of the White Jesus ought to be understood through western cultures and concepts of “chosen” versus “Other.” The most effective presentations of the white Christ are those “rendered in realistic style.” Calling for a “deconstructive analysis of Christian art,” Winborne argues that we must understand the ways in which visual art advances oppressive mythical narratives, critically observing the “interrelatedness of our faith and art histories,” in order to stop reinscribing some of the same oppressive myths.

“The Great Commission in the Face of Suffering as *Minjung*” by Dr. Michelle Sungshin Lim deals with the role of North American and European missions in creating the structure and system that favors the “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy.” While missionaries failed to recognize other religious practices in the native lands, they also upheld a superior mindset that objectified the natives. As a means to rectify the damage done in the past, she suggests a “Christ-praxis” by revisiting Ahn Byung Mu’s claim that *minjung* is *ochlos*. By identifying *ochlos* as *minjung*, a theology of “God-walk” (versus “God-talk”) enhances liberation from oppression. She identifies the danger in the current South Korean churches that follow the model of “white-

supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” of North America and suggests that their missionary strategy should empower the poor in the Global South.

Rohan P. Gideon in his essay, “Children’s Agency and Edinburgh 2010: The Great Commission or a Greater Omission?”, attempts to explain why the agency of children is significant in understanding Christian missions. He shows “how the whole Christian mission motif to preach and to lead also translates in adult-children relationships as adults’ prerogative to prescribe and control, especially in understanding the place and role of children in mission.” He employs agency as prescribed in postcolonial criticism along with the theological significance of the agency of the marginalized as explained in the doctrine of the Trinity. “Child in the midst,” a theme from the Child Theology movement, is suggested as a means to enhance the agency of children in theological discussions.

PART 4: THE GREAT COMMISSION AND CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: RETHINKING OUR PEDAGOGY

Drs. Karen D. Crozier, Anthony G. Reddie, and Lord Elorm-Donkor deal with the nexus between the Great Commission and Christian education and the psychological and moral damage inflicted on black peoples. They are convinced that missionary strategies of white supremacy failed to recognize God’s image in those they missionized and the efficacy of indigenous religious beliefs. The European colonizing elements in the teachings of the Great Commission failed to incorporate a radical, new way of being human, and thus distorted the humanness of all, inflicting damage on black peoples and their communities.

In her essay, “Interrogating the Matthean Great Commission for US Christian Education: Reclaiming Jesus’ Kingdom of God Message for the Church,” Dr. Karen D. Crozier draws insights from Howard Thurman to develop Christian education as a means to demonstrate that “our identity, as humans, lies beyond the non-ontological particulars such as religion, race, color, creed, gender, class, sexuality, denominations, and national origin that alienate us from self, others, the world, and the divine.” Crozier questions the very use of the term the Great Commission and reclaims the significance of Jesus’ message for social, political, economic, and religious emancipation.

Dr. Anthony G. Reddie’s essay, “Beginning Again: Rethinking Christian Education in Light of the Great Commission,” highlights the importance of identity and self-esteem in Christian education and argues that Christian education should be concerned about wider questions of human growth and development. As mission aims at God’s saving activity in the world informing people about Christian faith, the role of the Christian educator is also linked

to affirming self-esteem in people. Reddie challenges us to rethink Christian education in light of black theology and transformative learning in order to reformulate the Christian identity of Africans over against hierarchical white supremacy.

In his article, “Christian Moral Education and the Great Commission in an African Context,” Dr. Lord Elorm-Donkor addresses the absurdity of the dual reality of so-called successful Christian missions in Africa alongside obvious sociopolitical and economic degeneration. He asks whether Christian missions were as successful as purported in making disciples in Africa. Elorm-Donkor discusses the collateral sociopolitical and economic damage inflicted upon Africa’s “moral conceptual scheme” and argues for an integration of African traditional religion and Christian moral education that can complement each other.

PART 5: THE GREAT COMMISSION’S IMPACT ON/IN THE CHURCH: VOICES FROM BEYOND THE ACADEMY

MarShondra Scott Lawrence in her essay, “A United States Inner-city Oriented Great Commission,” writes as a Christian who grew up in and loves the people of the inner cities. She sheds light on how inner cities in the United States exist more or less as invisible *glocal ghettos*. Lawrence argues that the Great Commission must be understood as a challenge to engender social justice and love in the inner cities in order to improve the living conditions and realities of their residents who have been rendered invisible.

In her essay, “The Great Commission’s Impact on a Short-term Missionary and Lay Leader in the Church of God in Christ,” Dr. June C. Rivers shares the story of her grandmother who was revolutionary in her own right in embodying the Great Commission with love and social justice. Her father Rev. Havius Green and Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, the founder of the Church of God in Christ, also influenced her with their insistence on social justice and African cultural identity. They relied not on one biblical text as a paradigm for doing missions, but on several. From her own experience as a short term missionary coordinator for Youth on a Mission (YOAM) to Africa, South America, Caribbean islands, and Asia, Rivers believes that the “role of the church is . . . to embody the love of Jesus Christ by exemplifying acts of charity.”