

Great Commission, Great Compassion Following Jesus and Loving the World

Paul Borthwick

Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 208 pages, \$16.00 USD, paper

Reviewed by: Shane W. Parker, Ph.D.

Adjunct Professor of Leadership and Discipleship

Director of Professional Doctoral Studies

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Louisville, Kentucky

“Ultimately, this book is about choices” (14). Those familiar with the published work of Paul Borthwick, which spans 30 years of research and writing, will be accustomed to the focused challenges that the author provides, particularly along the lines of global perspective and Great Commission engagement. His writings include *A Mind for Missions*, *How to be a World-Class Christian*, and *Western Christians in Global Missions*. Borthwick writes *Great Commission, Great Compassion* from both a background of teaching and publication, as well as operating in his current capacities as Senior Consultant with Development Associates International and Adjunct Professor of World Missions, at Gordon College, in Wenham, Massachusetts.

The “choices” that Borthwick addresses, in the work under consideration here, are captured in a single, reflective query, “Will I choose to live as a full-on, 24/7, passionate follower of Jesus—with a lifestyle that expresses that commitment through my words and through my concern for others” (14-15)? In an effort to guide readers toward an unwavering “yes,” in response to this question, the author considers first “Biblical Foundations” for Christian mission and compassion (Chapters 1-6), and then he establishes what he deems “Lifestyle Imperatives” for those who take up this mantle (Chapters 7-14). The author’s contention is that there is a distinct need for greater “balance” (17), as “practice and proclamation are the two hands of the gospel,” and Borthwick sees an acute need to stand for “justice, peace, and reconciliation,” as those who speak the truth of Christ (25-26).

In examining “biblical foundations,” for the sake of reaching this “even-handed” approach to discipleship, Borthwick initially seeks to establish scriptural warrant for his perspective on the “Great Commission, Great Compassion lifestyle” (27-51). Here, the author explores: “Jesus’ final imperatives” (27-33); the five “Great Commission” statements, which occur in the Synoptic Gospels, John, and the Acts of the Apostles (34-42); and finally Borthwick examines three themes, which he observes in the commonality, contours, and nuances of each statement (43-51).

While the brief treatment of the Gospels and Acts is straightforward, and there is helpful interpretive information to be gained, Borthwick noticeably shines in the areas of applicative and implicative observation. An example of this strength may be found in the themes, or “takeaways,” proffered in Chapter 4. As he prepares to move from commission to compassion, in terms of discrete emphasis, the author notes that the following themes emerge from his survey of the Great Commission texts: (1) a “mindset” that “we *are* sent, starting right where we are” (43); (2) as sent people, Christians are to be “purposeful” and “cross-cultural,” in the view and

engagement of the world (47-48); and (3) the assurance of active, divine presence, particularly emphasized in Matthew 28:20, Luke 24:49, and Act 1:8, is to undergird and propel Christian witness (50-51).

Therefore, this Great Commission witness is to take the shape of “empowered, multiculturally sensitive sent ones” (52). The challenge here is that this witness must tangibly translate into the context of “human relationships,” and Borthwick presses the specific dynamics of displaying compassion toward those enduring poverty, or other forms of suffering and oppression (52-64). The core biblical foundation here is presented as Matthew 25:31-46, which the author refers to as “The Great Compassion” (54). Borthwick then briefly treats each of the areas of need mentioned in the scriptural passage (e.g., hunger, thirst, sickness, imprisonment), in turn, as a means to begin to move toward application.

This movement provides a bridge to the final “foundational thoughts” for this section (Chapter 6), as the writer offers another set of “takeaways,” this time making application to the area of demonstrated compassion (65-73). While these “thoughts” are, generally, in keeping with the flow of thought, both prior to, and following, these observations play a negligible role. The author appears to concede as much, noting that, “The imperatives for commission and compassion living will come in part two of the book, but for now let’s build on these” (65). How these thoughts are altogether different from, or foundational to, the material in part two does not appear readily apparent. Had the writer made this linkage explicit, it may have strengthened the outlined sequence from commission, to compassion, to the imperative need for action.

The second part of the book outlines “Lifestyle Imperatives,” of missional living. The chapter titles, expressing each imperative, are: “Choose” (Chapter 7); “Learn” (Chapter 8); “Look” (Chapter 9); “Pray” (Chapter 10); “Welcome and Celebrate” (Chapter 11); “Simplify and Give” (Chapter 12); “Stand Together” (Chapter 13); and “Go” (Chapter 14). In each of these chapters, Borthwick ties a prescribed set of attitudes and actions both to the “foundational” observations established in part one, and an additional “biblical reflection” segment, provided at the outset of each chapter (e.g., 77-79; 86-87; 98-100; 109-110; 123-27; 140-41; 153-55). This approach proves helpful, as it repeatedly redirects the reader back to biblical and theological norms, as the basis for the exhortations to act in a compassionate manner.

This method is a particular strength in Chapters 11 (“Welcome and Celebrate,” 123-39), and 13 (“Stand Together,” 153-66). In Chapter 11, the author examines Peter’s interaction with Cornelius (Acts 10), as a means to identify a need among those in Christ “to create contexts where we can encounter each other and God to the point that our stereotypes are refuted” (127). Borthwick then moves beyond awareness, and transformed perspective, to resultant actions including: proactivity in “looking for” and “going to” unregenerate people and populations (130-31); actively caring for and relating to immigrants and refugees (131-33); and those who may be seen as “outsiders,” in the sense that they are typically beyond the reach of many churches (134-37). The author then offers a poignant application of the church’s responsibility, and opportunity, to serve and reach “LGBTQ persons in their community,” as those who struggle with same sex attraction are sometimes seen as more challenging to love than the “crosscultural stranger” (137). Borthwick’s ability to make accessible, actionable suggestions, in a manner that is biblically-grounded, and missionally-sound, is clearly showcased here.

Similarly in Chapter 13, the author briefly explores the narrative of Esther, the case of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), and Paul's Letter to Philemon (153-55). He then concludes that, "All three accounts include people willing to risk loss on behalf of hurting people" (154). In an effort to address "advocacy," for those who are poor and oppressed, Borthwick then poses the question, "What positions of privilege or power has God given us that we can use to stand for those whom hardship, oppression or injustice has silenced" (155)? The author's espoused pathway to answering this question, and acting with resolve in advocacy, is lined with wise practical notes that include: considering those in proximity to you personally, and to your church (156); ensuring that personal conviction is informed by, and tightly wed to, corporate prayer, worship, and fellowship (160-61); and principles for engaging in the demanding, but necessary, "hard work" of "peacemaking" and reconciliation (164-66). Again, these sturdy notes of application and implementation will likely prove helpful to those looking to address their personal need to exhibit advocacy, as disciples following Jesus, on mission.

Great Commission, Great Compassion was written to "challenge our ideas of what it means to follow Christ" (178). Paul Borthwick accomplishes this task, by guiding the reader to assess, and act upon, the call of the Great Commission, and the need to obey Christ in consistently compassionate living. As Borthwick offers a thoughtful, accessible, and provocative treatment of these issues, the text would be well-suited for multiple settings, including: local church group studies, pastoral staff development, and undergraduate and masters course offerings. This work provides a versatile introduction to the purposes and practices of Great Commission living, both in proximity to home, and to the ends of the earth.