



December 2004

Dear Friends of Mars Hill Audio,

If someone who was a stranger to Christian belief asked you to explain what is meant by the “Great Commission,” what would your short answer be? If I were a gambling man, I would bet that the answer of most American Christians would focus on the necessity of evangelism: Christians have a mandate from their Lord to make converts.

Of course, Jesus said no such thing. He said to make disciples, to baptize them, and to teach them to obey everything he ever taught. Obviously the first step to making disciples is to encourage conversion, but the Church has not honored the Great Commission if it has failed to nurture obedient and baptized disciples.

Disciples are those who have accepted certain disciplines. Disciples of Jesus are those who are following him instead of following something else. Far too much contemporary American evangelism encourages people to follow Jesus as a religious explanation for following something else they are already following (self-fulfillment, the American Dream, commitment to family values or social justice, spirituality, etc.). That is not at all what New Testament discipleship looks like.

It’s not even true to the meaning of conversion. My dictionary lists several synonyms for the verb “convert.” Metamorphose. Transform. Transfigure. Transmogrify. Transmute. Alchemical words all, with decisive and substantive changes in view. This list reminds me of an observation in Peter Leithart’s recent book, paradoxically entitled *Against Christianity*: “To be a Christian means to be refashioned in all of one’s desires, aims, attitudes, actions, from the shallowest to the deepest.”

Leithart’s book is a brief against the assumption that “Christianity” is just a set of doctrinal positions that one is encouraged to take, essentially apart from any particular way of life. “Christianity” is thus an abstraction that may or may not make any difference in the lives of those who assent to it. The New Testament (and the Old), Leithart argues, is not interested in advancing a bare belief system, but in calling into being a new people, the Church. In being called to discipleship, to faith, one is called to more than (but not less than) an inner commitment to certain propositions. “Though the New Testament does use ‘faith’ to refer to a set of teachings (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 4:7), ‘faith’ stretches out to include one’s entire ‘stance’ in life, a stance that encompasses beliefs about the world but also unarticulated or inarticulable attitudes, hopes, habits of thought, action, or feeling. To be ‘of one mind’ (Phil. 1:27) means to share projects, aspirations, and ventures, not simply to hold to the same collection of doctrines.”

On Leithart's account, Christian faith is both more radically inward than mere belief (transforming our loves and hopes) and more decisively outward (reorganizing our actions). "Evangelism-as-sales-talk" is never so ambitious.

As long as the Great Commission is understood only as a matter of somehow getting our contemporaries to assent to our message, Christians will be tempted to recast the message in likable, plausible terms. But the more post-Christian our culture becomes (and it is quite far down that path already), the less plausible the message of the Gospel (and the transformation it requires) is likely to be. Stanley Hauerwas has complained that "Christians in modernity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel." This echoes the wonderfully wise counsel of Lesslie Newbigin in *Foolishness to the Greeks*, a book about how a truly missionary encounter of the Gospel with every culture (including our own) always requires confrontation, a repudiation of those assumptions that are regarded as the wisdom of the age, but which are finally folly.

Newbigin insists that the contextualization of the Gospel in any place and age requires three things:

- 1) The communication has to be in the language of the receptor culture. It has to be such that it accepts, at least provisionally, the way of understanding things that is embodied in that language; if it does not do so, it will simply be an unmeaning sound that cannot change anything.
- 2) However, if it is truly the communication of the gospel, it will call radically into question that way of understanding embodied in the language it uses. If it is truly revelation, it will involve contradiction, and call for conversion, for a radical metanoia, a U-turn of the mind.
- 3) Finally, this radical conversion can never be the achievement of any human persuasion, however eloquent. It can only be the work of God.

That radical work of God in conversion and discipleship is nothing less than the making of a new creation, and to the extent that our cultural lives are extensions of our engagement with creation, the patterns of our cultural conventions require transformation as well. Jesus did not die, rise, and ascend to change something in our hearts and leave it at that, but thereby to change everything.

One way that Christians have escaped the ramified demands of discipleship, especially in the shape of our cultural lives, is to assume that the sphere of Creation and the sphere of Redemption are intrinsically separate. So our salvation is understood as a "spiritual" matter, an inner transformation, while our social and cultural lives can continue to be lived in accordance with the allegedly neutral, value-free, mechanical principles established by economists, sociologists, and other scientific experts. We thereby assume that we can escape worldliness by ignoring hard questions about economics, art, politics, and technology by concentrating on inward concerns.

Catholic theologian David Schindler has argued that American Christianity has been driven by a “dualism that undergirds a conception of salvation as individualistic and, as it were, world-less.” Schindler observes that:

Christians have been careful watchdogs of morality and inner-churchly piety even as they have largely given away the orders of space, time, matter and motion—and indeed the entire realm of the body and bodiliness, and of the artifacts and institutions in and through which space, time, matter, and motion become human culture.

But embracing a faith that is “world-less” is, of course, a recipe for worldliness. It means that we accept the world’s explanation about Creation even as we cling to our message about Redemption, however gnosticized it has become. Many Christians, in fact, seem eager to embrace the world’s understanding of life in the material world if it will serve the cause of evangelism.

In Europe, modern secularism has meant that almost no one goes to Church. Americans have been much more clever about negotiating with modernity. We have maintained market share by allowing secular assumptions and practices to order the Church’s life. Our understanding of history and tradition, of youth and maturity, of leadership and authority, of beauty and desire, of language and truth, of family and fidelity, of the self and moral order is increasingly conformed to the spirit of the age.

In consequence, the settings for our gathered worship have been transformed from sanctuaries, portals of mysteries and arresting awe, into loud, throbbing Skinner boxes of engineered stimulus and response. The divorce rate among theologically conservative Christians is as high as the rate in the population at large. Christian women suffer from eating disorders to the same extent as do non-Christian women. From my own informal research, it would seem that the prevailing attitudes among Christians toward art and beauty, toward work and the modern ideal of efficiency, toward the ordering of time and the valuing of place, are statistically no different than those of non-believers.

What I find most disturbing is that most pastors don’t seem to care that this is the case, or don’t think that it’s a problem they need to address. Many pastors see themselves as service providers of techniques of attitude adjustment, seeking the eager enthusiasm of fans and the safe contentment of satisfied consumers, instead of being shepherds committed to the deep and often painful reorientation of souls.

I realize that these are all overstated generalizations, and I will rejoice with you if you insist that none of this is the case in the church you make your home. But I believe that the general pattern of American churches at this time is characterized more by accommodation of the disorders of contemporary culture than by a commitment to be truly counter-cultural communities in all areas of life. This judgment in no way questions the sincerity or commitment of

those Christians in view; it simply raises questions of definition of what they are sincere about and committed to. I believe that the biblical account of the meaning of our salvation is more comprehensive, more ramified than is commonly assumed. Furthermore, I agree with those more knowledgeable than I (including many I've cited above) that the reason such comprehensiveness is neglected or denied has a lot to do with the way the culture of the Enlightenment encouraged the confinement and limitation of religion.

The concerns I've expressed here are among the guiding editorial concerns of my work for **MARS HILL AUDIO**. Some people are surprised to learn that I have an editorial agenda. They think that I'm just trying to interview some interesting people. But my nagging obsession is to try to encourage Christians to wrestle more deeply with the consequences of our faith in the world, and to be more alert to the ways the world has diluted our faithfulness.

If you've heard me lecture in the past five years, you've probably heard me quote James 1:27 as a charter for Christian cultural engagement: "Religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Paul's injunction in Romans 12:2 is making the same point: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." That will has something to do with cultural life, not just our interior life.

There are not many institutions dedicated to advancing these concerns. Perhaps that is why our supporters have consistently been so encouraging, generous, and enthusiastic about our work. I hope that what we are doing continues to merit those responses, and as the time of traditional year-end giving is upon us, I'm hopeful for practical as well as idealistic reasons. As you probably know, gifts to support **MARS HILL AUDIO** are tax-deductible, and we would not be able to stay in business if we did not receive those gifts. I hope that you'll also continue to pray for us to be persistent in wisdom, creativity, and charity as we pursue the vocation God has given us in this work.

Most of all, I hope that something in this letter will stimulate you to expand your ideas about the meaning of discipleship, and that in your family and congregation, you will continue to encourage one another to love and good works, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Sincerely,



Ken Myers
Producer and Host