

Commissions

A commission is an assignment or an appointment. It's a formal assignment, one that includes an investment of power and authority. The assignment would be to carry out certain specified duties. Yet, a commission carries with it more than just this description. It has the sense, for example, of commitment. It also has a sense of mutuality, that is, there's a relationship between the One doing the commission and the one being commissioned. More specifically, the one receiving the commission is acting on behalf of, or as an agent for, the one granting the commission.

In the Bible are a lot of commissions. A lot. In fact, I suggest that the Bible is really a record of God's many commissionings. Throughout history, God has repeatedly commissioned certain deliberately chosen human creatures to do certain designated work for Him with His authority and empowerment, thereby carrying out His great creational purposes.

We think of the Bible as a record of God's covenants, and that's true. The word covenant is used in the texts, after all. But it may be that the covenants are ancillary, that is, they are a necessary adjunct or component to the commissioning. So it will be helpful to survey these commissions in the Bible because there's an important lesson here for us. One we've sadly missed but need to learn.

The first commissioning takes place right on page 2 of the Bible. On page 1 is Creation. And the very next item on the very next page is this archetype of all future commissionings. It's as if God were saying, "The theme of all Scripture, everything from this point going forward, is putting My human creatures to work for Me." Humans uniquely are made in the image of God. What that means could be that we have been given certain of God's communicable attributes. Or it means that we're made to reflect Him as a mirror reflects an image of a person, and by reflecting God's goodness we glorify Him. Perhaps it means both. We have the image so that we're able to function as God's vice-regent on earth, as His lieutenant, carrying out His purposes, which included ruling in some sense over God's creation under God's sovereign authority.

In Genesis 2:15 is the actual commissioning. Man was put in God's garden to . . . *to do what?* The Hebrew words that are used here, *abad* and *shamar*, have been variously translated. The NIV says, "to work it [i.e., the garden] and to take care of it." The Holman Bible reads, "to work it and watch over it." The ESV, NASB and NET are similar. I think these unfortunately are eisegetical comments rather than translations. Another translation is preferable. *Abad* in the Hebrew Scriptures means either "to worship" or "to serve," depending on the context. *Shamar* usually mean "to obey;" it can mean "keep" in the sense of "keep My commandments," i.e., obey them. "To obey" makes good sense because the next verse warns the man to heed God's word. The tree was put there as a test of obedience. So God commissioned Adam to serve Him and to obey Him. In return, God placed on offer a pleasant life in a good creation and the enjoyment of God's presence. So here is the basic and essential role that humanity has in God's cosmos. We're created to be God's obedient servants.

The subsequent chapters (3-10) document the miserable failure of God's creatures to fulfill their creational role, although there were a few who did. Noah, for example, received a very special commission. He was tasked with saving humanity plus all animal life from annihilation due to God's wrath in what was prophetic of the salvation through judgment at Calvary. He served God by carefully obeying God's word, despite all that was reasonable, probably enduring mocking and rejection. And in return he and his family, and the animals, were saved.

The next commissioning, that of Abraham, begins in Chapter 12 but is spread out in the ensuing chapters (15,22). Here, God gave Abraham the task of "believing." He was commissioned to be the first of many who would, in the context of near universal sin and failure and overt rebellion against God, trust God by obeying Him, *no matter what*. More specifically, Abraham was commissioned to believe God's promises regarding the unknowable future as certain truth and to live on the basis of them. Why? Because God was trustworthy. To support that commissioning and in return for Abraham's willing and trusting obedience, God gave Abraham a covenant, which we all are familiar with and needn't discuss here. Abraham experienced already in his life some of the blessings of that covenant, and that did two things: it confirmed God's faithfulness, and it motivated Abraham to faithfully adhere to his assigned role. Abraham was to be the progenitor of a race of trusting/obedient servants of God. God was still pursuing His creational purposes.

The next commissioning is the story of Moses. God appeared to Moses in Exodus 3, revealing Himself and commissioning him to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt to the land that had been promised to them. But more than that, Moses was to serve God as a prophet. It was his assigned duty to hear, speak and record for posterity the words and will of God for the chosen people of God. And Moses, as faithful servant, obeyed the voice of God. In return, God was uniquely with Moses, speaking to him intimately, revealing Himself to him, and working great miracles thru him.

The next commissioning in the Bible is different in that it's not of an individual but of an entire body of people. At Mt. Sinai in Exodus 19ff, God chose the Nation of Israel to be his obedient servant. They were to be a united body, a corporate unity, as if one person were expressing the image of God. They were assigned the role of revealing God's goodness to the surrounding wicked nations so that those Gentiles (or certain elect of them, anyway), in turn, would respond in faith by repenting of their sins and worship the Creator God. In return, God gave Israel the Sinai covenant, which essentially revealed Himself and His will by which they would live. God would dwell with them, in their midst, in that good land, protecting them, providing for them, blessing them. But they had to be obedient and trusting – or suffer discipline. The revelation of God to Israel was to lead them to love Him and fear Him, as well as to trust, obey and serve Him. Sadly, it didn't. As Adam previously had failed, so did Israel. Israel was not a faithful, obedient servant of God. Not then, anyway. (In the future, things will be different.)

There are lots more commissionings after Moses. Joshua was commissioned to carry out the Conquest of the Land on God's behalf (Ch's 5-6). He was a faithful and obedient servant. The Judges received commissions for specific duties although that was a terribly problematic period in Israel's history, as were the judges themselves. Samuel was commissioned as a judge/prophet (1 Samuel 3 and 7:15) and as king-maker. Faithfully speaking the Word of God and leading Israel is how he obediently served God. The kings of Israel were sort of commissioned to serve God. Except for Solomon in 1 Kings 3, there's no direct personal assignment of role, as there was, for example with Abraham and Moses; but it's clear from the many chapters narrating the monarchy that they were to serve God, fulfilling man's creational purpose. The kings were to reflect God's goodness (the "image"), be obedient, and serve Him by ruling over Israel in God's stead, with his authority. In return, the people would all identify with the king so that there was to be a corporate unity of God's people. And in return, Solomon explicitly received riches and honor besides wisdom. For His part, God would be glorified and His purposes carried out. But because of repeated failure during the era of the Monarchy, God sent prophets to speak His word to the kings.

Several of the writing prophets had special and unique commissions. Isaiah had an encounter with God (Ch 6) in which he was commissioned to speak the words of the Lord to a nation that, in judgment, wouldn't hear him. Isaiah had a vision of God's holiness that led him to cry out in fear and humility, and he received a special gift of atonement. Jeremiah too was specially called to serve God as a prophet (Ch 1). In return, God was with him to rescue him from those who hated the spoken Word. Ezekiel had a unique vision of the glory of God and a call to be a prophet to a rebellious people (Ch's 1-2). Daniel had an unusual commission, occurring later in his ministry. But Jonah's commission was the most unusual of all. He himself was to be the message, viz., rebellion was to be followed by resurrection and restoration. Jonah was a disobedient or failed – but restored – servant of the Lord, just like the Nation of Israel whom he represented. So, God commissioned different ones in different ways, but they all were to serve Him by being obedient to the Word, and they ministered in the power and authority of God.

In the New Testament era, we again encounter a number of faithful and obedient servants of God, uniquely commissioned to their particular roles and duties. Miriam, for example, the mother of Jesus; Zechariah, father of John the Baptist; and the Twelve. But the ultimate obedient Servant is Jesus. We refer to Him as Savior, King, Christ (or Messiah), Redeemer, and even the Son (as in Hebrews). But in the context of the entire Bible, He's the Servant of the Lord, as Isaiah foretold. The Messianic prophecies in the O.T., the birth narratives, and the voice from heaven at His baptism are His commissioning. He identified with Adam and with the Nation of Israel, but unlike those prior servants who failed, He is the faithful and obedient Servant. He fulfilled the roles of Abraham and Moses as well as David, Solomon and the other kings (sovereign rule, though, is for a future era). He fulfilled the roles of the writing prophets. He successfully ministered in the power and authority of God, fulfilling God's great purposes for creation. He also suffered. He was commissioned to do something no other could do, atone for the sins and failures of all humanity. And that necessitated terrible humiliation, agonizing pain and death. He is the Suffering Servant of God who makes it possible for everyone to enjoy the blessings of creation.

Peter was specially commissioned (John 21). Paul too was specially commissioned to serve the Lord (Acts 9). And he did that faithfully and obediently, despite the suffering he had to endure. Paul was uniquely gifted for a special role, taking the message of Christ to the Gentile world. But Paul was just one of very, very many who are commissioned to serve God as Paul did. The “Great Commission” at the end of Matthew, referred to also at the end of Luke and John, is explicit in Acts 1, involving everyone who follows Jesus. Every believer all thru the Church Age is included in that commissioning act. We’re all to be faithful and obedient to God’s Word, serving Him by taking the Gospel message to every human in the world, despite whatever suffering that role brings. If we’re *in Christ*, that work is ours to do. God assigned it to us and made the needed empowerment available.

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What’s the significance of this survey? A few comments follow, for what they’re worth.

First, God is Himself on a mission. His beloved human creatures were stolen from Him at the beginning, and He’s been at work since then, all thru history, to reclaim them for Himself. Why? So that He can bless them. That *missio dei* is entirely a labor of love. The commissions, all of them, are the main component of the *missio dei*. But God’s purposes also include showing the beauty and perfections of the Son. The many commissions in the O.T. are proleptic of the greatest commission of all, the work of the Son in completing the *missio dei*. It will be complete when the Son returns in judgment to establish the promised Kingdom and rule over it. Another of God’s purposes is the defeat of evil. How is evil defeated? By expressing love. The Son showed such love at Calvary. We show that same kind of love when we share the Gospel with others. To refuse to share it is – how can I be delicate in saying this? – is to participate in evil.

Second, God doesn’t need us to do His work. He has angels to serve Him. Even Satan must serve Him. Nevertheless, God has, in His infinite wisdom and goodness, reasons for involving us in His great purposes. I don’t pretend to know what His reasons are, but I can say this, I know nothing but intense joy in serving Christ by sharing the Gospel. I regard it as the greatest privilege anyone can have, serving the Creator and sovereign Ruler of all that exists. So perhaps that’s God’s reason. He’s giving us the wonderful privilege of serving and experiencing the joy of being united with God in His great purpose and mission.

Third, we touched on a principle that is very important. God’s original intent for mankind must have been that we would constitute an extended family. Why? Because all members of a family are not only genetically related but are joined in love and in mutual caring, meeting each other’s needs. The diversity was only introduced in Genesis 11 as a necessity to minimize the extent of sin and rebellion. The fragmentation of the human race was only to control the expression of sin. But a holy people, who practice righteousness, should be united. That’s why the Nation of Israel was to be a corporate unity, in anticipation of their holiness. But more: the unity included God. God was in their midst. A holy people united to a holy God was the ideal. And all would be working together with one common goal, the salvation of the rest of humanity lost in sin and to Satan. As Israel, so the Church. We are to be united, one holy body, a corporate unity, joined to Christ, with one common goal, the salvation of the rest of humanity. Thus we, followers of Christ, not only have our identity in Christ, we are the voice, arms and legs of Christ proclaiming the Gospel to our neighbors and downtown and in all the world. It’s why the Son was sent, and it’s why He sends us.

But we don’t do that. We *won’t* do it. “Evangelism is not my gift,” and “I don’t have that calling” are among the many pathetic excuses we offer for rejecting the servant-hood—our very identity!—that we’ve been commissioned to carry out. We have some bizarre notion that Christianity is sufficient if focused somehow on the church, on our “worship” [if that’s what it is] on Sunday mornings. We must be exceedingly careful about this matter, because Jeremiah’s prophetic condemnation of Judah centered on this very issue (2:20). Israel said, ‘I will not serve You’ and went off to *abad* (serve/worship) other gods. Beware, Church: If we don’t serve Christ *as He instructed*, we also will wind up serving other gods as well. We can’t excuse ourselves by claiming we’re under grace because so was Israel. Israel had super-abundant grace given to them too. They turned their relationship with God into a sham, so they were thrust into Exile to learn the hard way that their God is dangerous. The critical issue is, How do we respond to grace?

Dear Christian, we’ve been called or commissioned to be faithful to our new identity as servants joined to the Suffering Servant on mission to save a world of people lost in sin. So, let’s be faithful. After all, Christ commanded it. Love requires it.