

THE GOOD FIGHT

*HOLDING FAST TO FAITH ALONE
AND THE WORD OF CHRIST*



E. D. BURNS

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Excerpts taken from *Seeds and Stars: Resting in Christ for Great Commission Service*

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To:

*The pastors who faithfully support and stand with me
for the honor of Christ among the nations.*

*My father, who showed me how to fight for the gospel
and stand for Christ, even when backed to the wall.*

*Elijah and Isaiah, sons whose fidelity to Christ remain
steadfast as a steel blade.*

veritas et virtus

Depend on it, if we want to do good and shake the world, we must fight with the old apostolic weapons, and stick to dogma. No dogma, no fruits! No positive evangelical doctrine, no evangelization!... It is doctrine—doctrine, clear, ringing doctrine—which, like the ram's horns at Jericho, casts down the opposition of the devil and sin.

– J.C. Ryle

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E. D. Burns

Southeast Asia

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Preface

The content of this short book comes from the three most popular chapters of my previous book, *Seeds and Stars: Resting in Christ for Great Commission Service*.¹ I have entitled this book, *The Good Fight*, because our battle in Great Commission spirituality and service is to guard like a sentinel the ancient gospel doctrines. It is a fight for the faith, to be sure. But it is a good fight. And it is the good fight. We must contend for Scripture alone and faith alone. When those two *solas* of the Reformation lose ground, every other feature of the gospel system falters. If God doesn't effectually reveal Himself and His will through Scripture alone, then there is no end to the ways we can supposedly know God and His will. If we don't receive Christ and His righteousness through faith alone, then there is no limit to the combination of good works and faithfulness we might try to supplement our union with Christ and justification. We must fight to hold fast to the sharply cut truths of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* because they establish our Great Commission spirituality and service. They teach us to remember Jesus alone and rest in His complete work for us alone. Our hope is the Word of Christ. Our assurance is the work of Christ. We can contend for the gospel with gladhearted contentment in Great Commission service, confidently hoping in God's promises to save a people for Himself from all the language groups.

I have received numerous communications from pastors, missionaries, and other Great Commission servants that the three chapters included in this short book were quite helpful and encouraging for them personally or for people in their ministries. Many have asked me to extract these chapters from *Seeds and Stars* into short booklets that are easy to pack in a purse or a handbag and to pass around. And some pastors from various countries have asked to translate these particular chapters into their native languages. They are included here without much editing or any content updates.

Consider reading the whole book, *Seeds and Stars*, if you are curious about how the introduction and the other chapters relate to these three popular chapters. The rest of *Seeds and Stars* fleshes out how to have hope and endurance in Great Commission service for God's glory alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. For the sake of continuity, I will begin with what I mentioned in the preface of *Seeds and Stars*.

First Things: Terms and Vocabulary

Preface to *Seeds and Stars*

This book is not only for traditional missionaries. Any Christian could benefit from it. Though I wrote it as someone who has been a missionary for decades, I sought to apply it to all Christians. Instead of using the term “missionary” exclusively, I will frequently use the terms “Great Commission servant,” “gospel worker,” “gospel servant,” and other synonymous terms to incorporate anyone seeking to play an active role in Great Commission service. Sometimes, to emphasize the unique cross-cultural challenges that missionaries face, I might use a term like “cross-cultural servant,” etc. Such Great Commission Christians typically fall under the categories of missionary, minister, cross-cultural worker, evangelist, church-planter, disciple-maker, etc.

To be clear, the Great Commission is the mission of the church in general, not the mission of individuals specifically. But in obedience to the Great Commission, churches set apart, send, and support individual servants for more vocational, intentional, and specialized service in the Great Commission—some serve in more deacon-like roles, while

others serve in more elder-like roles. Again, the spirituality and missions-oriented principles of this book are for all Christians, but my point of reference and illustrations come from decades of labor in bicultural, foreign-language, least-reached contexts.

In terms of language and style, I use the general “he,” though I am aware of and thankful for the many sisters in Christ who play indispensable roles alongside their brothers in the Great Commission. In most places in the world, female missionaries are essential for reaching women and children. Since the Great Commission necessitates and prioritizes churchly work (planting churches, training pastors, translating Scripture, defending doctrine, etc.), it assumes elder-qualified servants. And so I am writing to encourage brothers and sisters in general, but especially brothers who lead as churchmen in the teaching and proclamation of the Word.

Scripture: Precept and Promise

God is not moved to make His promises by our worthiness, merits, or good works; but He promises purely on the basis of His inexhaustible and eternal goodness and mercy.

~Martin Luther~

“Let’s press in to seek God’s face so He’ll release His blessings.” ... “We need to throw away all that divides us and unite in love for Jesus in the realm of prayer so that the Spirit will flow through our city.” ... “If only we would walk in the Spirit, with clean hands and a pure heart, then God would release His blessings and push back the powers of darkness.” ... “God is calling us to incarnate Christ and partner with Him in building His kingdom of love and justice.” ... “God wants to do a new thing in the coming generation, to achieve the revolution of love initiated by Christ.” ... “In a spirit of prayer, we need to simply go where He says go, love on the poor, and obey with reckless abandon.” ... “God commands us to love Him and love others, and we will only finish the Great Commission if we love the world to Jesus.”

I've heard all these and more from Great Commission servants, mobilizers, students, and some even from my own zealous heart. They are indicative of a blend of juvenile naiveté, prime-of-life health, theological greenness, social-media crowd-mentality, big-heartedness, and sanguine optimism. It's not uncommon to hear mobilizers say that God has special purposes for the college-aged generation because they are poised to accomplish great things for God in their sold-out love for Him. Plus, those in their college years haven't supposedly hardened up from too much theology or the pessimism that comes with age. They are not restricted to marriage and family life, and they are free to love God fully and to carry on Christ's mission of love and justice to the world's oppressed. They can change the world. They must only unite, catalyze, synergize, and be released into the harvest.

To some, such words might sound inspiring and purpose-filled. That's understandable, especially since doing radical things for God are much more exhilarating than the weekly "Johnny-be-good" moralisms they learned in children's church and youth group. Instead of trying just to be better themselves, they now can launch into the world and redirect their efforts to make the world better. Instead of hearing weekly versions of how to love their neighbor (i.e., "obey your parents," "share with your sister," "mind to your teacher"), they now can enact real change with their life—"incarnate the love of Christ for their global neighbor whom they've never met before in the slums of some distant country." It's much easier to show your love

for God by loving your neighbor 7,000 miles away than 7 feet down the hall in an adjacent bedroom. Catalyzing global movements is so much sexier and surely more pleasing to God than quietly doing the dishes, caring for your depressed family member, and awkwardly trying to live the gospel so your comfortable suburban coworker will ask you about the hope you have. You don't want to waste your life by settling for second best. Your fear of missing out on God's best drives your anxious activism. You want to make a difference. If you want to show God how much you love Him, you must surrender all to show the world the love of God.

Conflating the Great Commandment and the Great Commission

After undergoing an intensive ordination process, completing a PhD in two diverse disciplines, and almost two decades of Great Commission service, only then did I begin to see how frequently Christians (and especially Great Commission servants) confuse biblical precepts and biblical promises. Only then did I realize how deadening it was to my soul to misunderstand and misapply the law of God and the gospel of God. Many presume the law is relegated to the Ten Commandments (specifically for OT Israel), while the gospel comprises the teachings of Christ to show us how to live a life of abundance and love for God (specifically for the NT church). And so, the popular notion proposes that the Great Commission and the Great

Commandment are two sides to the same proverbial coin.

The way Christians supposedly fulfill the Great Commission, therefore, is by transforming the world with the love of God in every sphere of society. And the way Christians truly love God and others is by living missionally, which means incarnating the gospel, which means being the face of Christ, which means pursuing love and justice, which means building Christ's kingdom, which means loving on the least of these, which means engaging this cultural moment, which means leaning into the heart of Jesus for the world, which means... I don't think anyone really knows. But such sloppy jargon and sappy sentiments inspire activist laptop-warriors, hot-selling Christian best-sellers, multi-million-dollar conferences, and niche-marketed Christian experts to peddle their relics that have rock-your-world impact. Many evangelical thought-leaders have amalgamated the empathetic niceness of the Great Commandment with the be-a-blessing-activism of the Great Commission. This grafting has not produced the distinctive spiritual fruit that the big evangelical industrial complex has guaranteed.

The bottom line is this: The Great Commandment—love God and love others perfectly and perpetually—sums up all the law and the prophets. Essentially, the law of God is anything in the Bible where blessings, reward, and life are conditioned upon perfect and perpetual holiness that is explicitly required, suggested, implied, or assumed. And for those who don't know the law from Scripture, it

is any moral code written on the human conscience that corresponds to God's standards of impeccable and infinite righteousness. Only by keeping this moral code fully and forever without one infraction and unholy inclination can we earn righteousness and have a ground on which to stand acceptable in God's sight. And no, God does not grade on a curve because "He knows our heart." That He knows our heart is actually terrifying news. Indeed, God expects us to be perfect as He is perfect. Yet, it takes no developmental psychologist to admit the universal human problem: there is none righteous, not even one.

The good news of the gospel is that the righteous Man anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures has come, has obeyed God's law perfectly, and has suffered the consequences of the law in place of all sinners who will receive Him. And He was raised from the dead for our justification. Having been justified through faith, recipients of such grace have peace with God. So, now, out of gratitude, the grace-endowed church labors in the Great Commission to announce to all the nations that the God-Man from Galilee has fulfilled the impossible demands of the law written on everyone's conscience. He has satisfied the wrath of God against law-breakers. And this announcement is a message of free grace for any who would receive it. There are no covenant stipulations or contractual conditions. All that is required of recipients? Nothing. The only thing we can give God is our debt. He pays the bill, but we have thereafter no debtor's ethic. No paying back God. No obedience to maintain favor. So, the Great Commission is the glad-hearted charge

to take that marvelous message to the nations and to make disciples who rest in grace through Word and worship.

Obeying the Gospel?

What about the biblical command to “obey the gospel” (cf. Romans 10:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17)? Surely, obedience is essential, right? Yes, in the sense that wherever Paul talks about obeying the gospel, he is referring to the biblical response to the gospel call, which is believe. After feeding the crowds with bread, Jesus said, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life which the Son of Man will give to you....’ Then they said to him, ‘What must we do, to be doing the works of God?’ Jesus answered them, ‘This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.... Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.’” (John 6:27–29, 33). God requires faith alone to receive the Bread of Life.

The Great Commission is not organically fused to the Great Commandment, wherein we can use imprecise, creative slogans and indistinguishably mix them. The Great Commandment demands perfect obedience to the law, which only Christ was able to fulfill. And the gospel is the announcement of the good news that law-breakers can be pardoned and counted as law-keepers through faith alone. And in light of such good news, the King of the commission charges His servants to train up disciples who dissem-

inate and defend this good news. They are to “guard the deposit” (1 Timothy 6:20). As God placed Adam in the garden to cultivate and guard it (cf. Genesis 2:15), so the Last Adam cultivates and guards His global church through His Great Commission servants. It is a joyful work that requires sword and trowel.

Evangelicals as Co-Redemptrix?

Protestants have historically rejected the medieval Roman Catholic Church’s notion of Mary as co-redemptrix—cooperating and participating in Christ’s redemptive work. But ironically, this seems to be the modern evangelical church’s popular opinion of itself. It’s the view that the church cooperates with Christ in saving the world by transforming it through loving God and others. This is an error of the most egregious kind. This propensity emerges from combining the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. And in the process, the gospel gets squeezed out. There is no good news in this system. It creates new laws that exhaust the saints, confuse the lost, and poison the gospel.

In the decades of my missionary service, I have seen utter devastation in the wake of Christian leaders who don’t hold to the doctrines of the absolute sovereignty of God, original sin, and justification by faith alone. And I have witnessed the wreckage of lives bulldozed by a prophetic mysticism, the flattening of distinct masculinity and femininity, critical theory’s woke religiosity, spiritually abusive

control-addicts, and every other profane union of biblical truth with cultural compromise. As grievous as all that is, I have never observed anything so consistently and pervasively demolishing as the confusion of law and gospel. And this is not merely a Western problem, nor a missionary problem. This is a global-church problem. A not-yet-glorified human problem. But of all people, I see it most noticeably in Great Commission servants, myself included. Why? Because gospel servants, by implication, drift toward an action-oriented expression of spirituality.

Law and Gospel, or “Lawspel”?

Any initiative that promotes gospel activism in addition to or equal to the gospel announcement has confused law and gospel—no small mistake. To be fair, we all likely have done this to some degree in our immaturity. If left unaddressed and unchanged, blending law and gospel will have eternal consequences. Unrepentant devotees to the “lawspel”—a mixture of unbiblical new laws and God’s law cloaked in gospely language—are promoting a false gospel that can never save.² It only condemns.

So, in Great Commission spirituality, as tempting as it is to talk passionately about “living the gospel” “kingdom building,” “partnering with God,” “incarnating Christ’s love,” or being “radical,” we must cautiously differentiate between precept and promise. If we do not, and if we merge law and gospel into an imprecise and activistic “lawspel,” we will lay unnecessary burdens upon not only ourselves

but upon those whom we are seeking to make into disciples. In confusing law and gospel in our spirituality and disciple-making, we are in danger of Jesus' warning to the Pharisees: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15).

To be clear, the classic Reformation articulation of law and gospel essentially teaches that all the precepts, imperatives, and instructions of Scripture (not merely the OT or the Ten Commandments) fall under the category of law, while all the promises of Scripture fall under the category of gospel. The gospel essentially means "the good news," and news is always an account of an event in the past tense. News that is good reports a past event that produces ongoing and even future blessings and benefits. The good news of the gospel indicates an accomplished event, not a potential future. Law is always potential—the standard for earning and enjoying future blessing. Promised future blessings are grounded in the good news that Christ has fulfilled the law's demands for us. However, potential future blessings are conditioned upon our past, present, and future perfect obedience to the law. What God requires by precept, He gives by promise. God's commands to love Him and love others should break us so that we would beg Him for mercy. And then in His generous love, He credits to us the righteousness He demands and the subsequent blessings as though we have always walked in righteous obedience. We are not infused with the righteousness of God. Christ came

to fulfill the law so that through faith we are imputed with the righteousness from God that Christ earned for us.

To be even clearer, God isn't waiting for us to grovel and seek Him and meet Him part way. He's not even waiting for us to go only one step toward Him so that He would take 99 steps toward us. No. There is no climbing Jacob's ladder. We are dead in the grave. God in Christ comes down and pulls us out of the ground, breathes new life into us, transplants a new heart in us, gives us a transfusion of Christ's pure blood, unplugs our ears, and peels our eyes open so that in the face of Christ, we can see and hear Him say, "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Isaiah 55:1). In other words, you who are so helpless, I will not only provide what is necessary for you to abound in life (righteousness and its blessings), but I will provide the means by which you must receive it—faith alone. God gives us the food we need and pries open our clenched fists and places faith alone with which we reach out and receive Christ. Through the gift of faith alone, God gives us Christ and all that He is for us for all of life. The law says, "do this and you shall live." The gospel says, "I have done this so that you shall live." Those seeking sanctification by precepts say, "All this we shall do." But those being sanctified in the promises say, "All this Christ has done; let us rest under His yoke." Believe and receive. Or try and die. There's no "lawspel" middle-way. No dialectical synthesis here. It's Jesus only or not at all.

Precept and Promise Work Together?

In Great Commission service, most activities and ministries can be categorized generally as either evangelism or activism. Many have attempted, including the eminent pastor-scholar John Stott (1921–2011), to conjoin evangelism and social action, calling it holistic ministry. Numerous good, altruistic arguments exist for why we should not focus exclusively on eternal suffering to the exclusion of temporal suffering. Personally, I have found that evangelism and social action are good friends only when evangelism leads. And that seems to correspond to how the Bible prioritizes the good news over good works.

The historical reality is that where evangelicals have been most evangelistic, you will also find them on the frontlines of compassion and mercy ministry simultaneously. Only isolated and short-lived historical anomalies suggest that a miniscule minority of evangelists show no compassion to the marginalized in favor of obnoxious and culturally offensive methods. The contemporary trends to tone down evangelistic zeal and elevate social action seem to come from activists who are gifted in mercy and who are likely uncomfortable with the bold personality and direct methods employed by outspoken evangelists. The push-back against evangelism-oriented ministries sometimes grows out of sheer personality-driven preferences. Yet increasingly it seems to emerge from fundamentally different theological and philosophical orientations.

The historical descriptions of “compassionate evangelists” or “evangelistic workers of mercy” don’t fit the progressive narrative, of course. Leftist critical deconstructionism and historical revisionism in the academy and now gradually in Christian institutions have lumped together evangelists with colonialism and social activists with anti-colonialism. So, in order to temper the embarrassing naivete of the eternity-minded evangelist, the tendency is to elevate social action as “the way of Jesus.” Additionally, the move to shush evangelistic priority as “zeal without knowledge” effectively quenches the Spirit-filled boldness of evangelism. The ministry of the evangelist is truly a special grace of the Holy Spirit, one that all Christians in measure should have the joy of practicing. But many consider it foolish, unsophisticated, and unconcerned with real womb-to-tomb life struggles. Many suggest a synthesis, a third way—adopting a holistic ministry of friendship evangelism, culture-savvy dialogue, and empathetic activism that imitates the “evangelical elite.”

So many Christianized activist ventures—redeem the city, create culture, build the kingdom, incarnate the gospel, enact racial justice, create climate change initiatives—are demonstrably draining. You can never do enough; you are never effective enough; and nothing ever works as planned. Activism might lead to incremental change but never fundamental transformation.

With all the confusion and errors of blending law and gospel and merging the Great Commandment with the

Great Commission, how do the precepts and promises of Scripture work together? Do the promises of God for us in Christ demotivate us? Should we worry about falling away and not persevering to the end? Aren't we required to produce fruit?

The Usefulness of the Bible's Instructions

Throughout church history, any teachings of free grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone typically suffers a head-on collision with claims that such "free grace" will lead to lawlessness and license for sin. That's an understandable caution. And at times I struggle with it myself. I've seen too many "Christians" excuse themselves for habitual sin claiming they "prayed the prayer" or that they will get serious about their faith in the future.

The moral precepts of God essentially function in three ways: a reflection, a restraint, and a rule, or a mirror, a manager, and a manual. First, as the pedagogical use, the law reflects the righteousness of God and underscores our inability and disinclination to love God and love others perfectly (cf. Romans 3:20; 4:15; 5:13). Having discovered our need for forgiveness and justification, the law teaches us to turn to Christ in repentance and faith (Galatians 3:19–24). Second, as the civil use, the law that all men have written on their hearts serves to inhibit evil through threats of punishment established by civil codes (cf. Deuteronomy 13:6–11; 19:16–21; Romans 13:3–4). Third, as the moral use, the law instructs Spirit-filled New Covenant believers

how to walk righteously in gratitude because of the grace of God. It is essentially a family code of conduct for the adopted children of God to follow. The law is not a killjoy for believers. Rather, it guides us to live in goodness, truth, and beauty that corresponds to the good life *coram Deo* that humanity lost at the fall. Though the law can never empower us to live unto righteousness, in Christ through faith alone it now teaches us how to live in a way that imitates and honors Christ. With new hearts and Spirit-filled affections, the Father's family serves Him with thanksgiving for God's lovingkindness in freely imputing to us Christ's righteousness. The law that was once an unbearable burden and a threatening judge is now a code of honor in which believers delight to defend and follow. Just as God delights in His law, so now His Spirit-filled temple—the church—delights in His ways (cf. John 14:15).

When we stare at the mirror of the Word of God, with our veils lifted, we see Christ (not ourselves). But before our spiritual eyes are opened, when we look at the Word, we see Moses revealing the law's demands, perfect conditions for blessing, and severe consequences for transgression. Yet, once God opens our spiritual eyes, we behold Christ. We look away from ourselves and to Him alone. And accordingly the triune God transforms us incrementally into the image of the One whom we behold. This is the freedom of the Spirit: to set us free from the law to become increasingly like Christ (in love to God and others) whose life works so powerfully in us (cf. 2 Corinthians 3:7–18).

Therefore, for instance, when we read the Proverbs, we must not read them as though we were pre-Christian Jews, seeking to keep sage-like wisdom for life by ourselves. Rather, when we read the proverbial instructions, we should rest in the truth that the boy Jesus inculcated biblical wisdom perfectly, grew into perfect manhood, and became the truly wise and successful Man of righteousness. He never sinned once, and furthermore, He always thought, spoke, and acted righteously. He becomes our immutable wisdom and righteousness through trusting in Him alone. When we apply the third use of the law rightly with grace alone, we should read proverbial wisdom as fulfilled by Christ for us, credited to us, and then progressively established in us by the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit empowers us to heartily imitate Christ. So now, instead of obeying the proverbs to achieve wisdom and produce success, we seek to obey the proverbs to imitate Christ out of love and gratitude for Him. We become like what we behold. Since we exceedingly admire Him, we want to grow up and be just like our elder Brother. Released from the demands of the law, our souls are free to love Jesus and abide in His love and keep His Word. We love Him because He first loved us.

A Tale of Two Mountains

In many religions and worldviews, it is not uncommon to find a notion that the highest mountain or the highest building is sacred, as though it were to connect to heaven above. When I served in the Tibetan mountains, the monks would place prayer flags atop the highest peaks as