Education, Orality, and the Great Commission

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Abstract

This article considers the nexus between the Great Commission, education, and orality. The Great Commission is a command to reach the entire world with the good news of Jesus Christ. Though it has significantly advanced around the world, much still needs to be done. With a simple qualitative approach, the article explores four dimensions of education in the Great Commission: preaching, Christian education, theological education, and public education. Using Africa as a context, the article then suggests that orality is a communication paradigm that, if properly engaged, would make these dimensions of education effective.

Key Words: Christian education, gospel communication, Great Commission, orality, theological education

Introduction

The Great Commission is the marching order that Jesus gave to the Church to win the world. For centuries of Christian engagements with the nations through mission, the Great Commission has been the driving force helping believers carry the good news of the Lord Jesus to the unsaved.

Several tools are engaged in carrying out this Commission. Among such are evangelism and witnessing to the salvation of Christ by personal or group contact, preaching formally or informally, prayer, social ministries, and education. This article singles out *education* as a viable tool for executing and advancing the Great Commission.

Some initial questions to raise are, what constitutes the Great Commission? What is the place and function of education in the Great Commission, and how can it be made more effective, especially in a continent like Africa? The ensuing discussion will be situated within the context of orality, and a nexus between orality, education, and the Great Commission will be formed. The article posits that education remains a very powerful tool in advancing the Great Commission, and education in Africa must not jettison the oral nature of the continent if the Church is to be effective in achieving the goals of the Great Commission.

Concept of the Great Commission

Matthew 28:18-19 states: "Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go 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 surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age'." This well-known passage, widely called "the Great Commission," is Jesus's post-Resurrection command to his disciples. These words can also be found echoing through such passages as Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-23, and Acts 1:4-5, 8 (Peters 2005, 239). David Hesselgrave notes that the Great Commission is also referred to as the "Evangelistic Mandate," in contrast to the cultural or social mandate as recorded in Genesis 1:28-30 and Gen. 9:1-7, when humans were to multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have responsible dominion over God's creation (Hesselgrave 2000, 412).

In the Great Commission, which David Cooper has referred to as the "Only Commission" (that Jesus gave), the disciples were to carry out some cogent tasks (Cooper 2001, 35). First, they were to go and not to stay. This Commission is an invitation to an adventurous journey where many possibilities, opportunities, and challenges will unfold. What will then be needed are ministry methods that are "faithful to the commission, flexible to meet cultural challenges and relevant to people's lives" (Cooper 2001, 36-37). When the Early Church refused to obey the charge to go and preferred to gather, as seen in Acts 4:42-47 and subsequent chapters, the persecution of Stephen scattered the Church. Acts 8:1-4 reveals, "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." Cooper notes that the word "scattered" as used here and in 1 Peter 1:1 is "diaspora" and refers to the scattering of seed. That is, God scattered his people all over the world as a farmer scatters his seed in expectation of a good harvest (Cooper 2001, 38).

Secondly, the Commission was to go into the world. It is the world of God's creation and, yet, the world of sin and suffering due to the problem of evil. According to Cooper, "Jesus said to go into the world—into all areas of the world—all cultures, all religions, all music, all education, all politics, all institutions, all technology, all entertainment. We are to infiltrate, not isolate" (Cooper 2001, 39). The world here in the light of the New Testament *ethne* refers to "all the ethnic peoples of the world" (Broyles 1992, 282). This is the sense in Matthew 28:19. Jesus specifically tells his disciples to go to all the world's people groups, and in Matthew 24:14, he promises that all of them would hear the gospel. Indeed, he is not coming back until all of them have heard (Broyles 1992, 282).

The third component of the Great Commission is what to take to the world and the nations of the world. This is the good news. That is the chief business of the Great Commission. The gospel is the good news. In one sense, the good news is "Jesus' message of the appearance of God's kingdom, a message of unfailing liberty for those held capture to any form of affliction and demonstrated most dramatically in acts of healing" (Broyles 1992, 282). In another sense, the gospel or good news "encompasses the whole story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus" (Broyles 1992, 282). This Jesus-centered nature of the good news is why Job Alabi defines the gospel in "three words": Christ! Christ! and Christ! Alabi means here that the gospel is "Christ died for our sins, Christ was buried that our sins might be buried forever and Christ rose again for our victory" (Alabi 2015, 41-42). Evangelism, which is the announcement of the good news, therefore, becomes paramount to the task of fulfilling the Great Commission.

Another component of the Great Commission is making disciples. The Commission is not just to get people saved, it is to teach them to live like Jesus. A disciple is a learner, a follower or a student. Gbile Akanni defined discipleship as "a process of reproducing or imparting the life of a teacher to a pupil. It is a life-on-life process, a systematic and cumulative way of making someone (a student, a pupil, a trainee, an apprentice, a raw material, and a disciple) to be conformed or transformed into the image, the stature and the full personality of the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Akanni 2013, 101).

In David C. Cooper's perspective, evangelism is education. Making disciples involves teaching them to observe all that Christ did and taught (Cooper 2001, 46). Whether at the point of

conversion or conservation, the task of education cannot be divorced from the Great Commission, and that is what this article looks into next.

The Interface between Education and the Great Commission

Just as evangelism is education, mission work is "inherently educational" (Ferris 2000, 301). The reasons are obvious. As long as the Great Commission remains the mandate and chatter of Christian mission and a central component of that Commission is to make disciples and teach, then the Church has a great stake in education. Such education has taken place through various means in modern mission; Ferris mentions preaching, home Bible studies and one on one encounter, educational ministries of the Church, and theological education (Ferris 2000, 301). A few lights will be thrown on some of these means.

Preaching, for one, has been and remains a channel of teaching and nurturing the Church. Hence, a good preacher is equally a good teacher. One of the qualifications for pastoral leadership in 1 Timothy 3:2 is being able to teach. It therefore becomes vital for preachers to develop pulpit methodologies that communicate the truth of God's word. Such effective communication involves having what Lawrence O. Richards called a "single concept focus" (Richards 1980, 299). Having that kind of focus requires the preacher to understand the organised nature of the Scripture and the clear sequence of its developed thought. The Bible is not to be preached like a book made up of "a series of random thoughts, dropped unorganised from this pen or that" (Richards 1980, 301). Preaching against the backdrop of Scripture's macro-story is actually the emphasis of contemporary evangelical homileticians (in agreement with the earlier ones) who appeal for expository preaching that takes note of the "big idea" of a passage, expounds or exposits it, and applies it to the listeners (Robinson 2001, 4-5, 33-50; Ajibade 2018, 4-5). There should also be an emphasis on response to the Word of God, and calling for such a response must be deliberately built in from the preparation of the sermon. Expectancy is equally key to a sermon that would educate. The tone of the message often sets a tone for those who listen to it. According to Richards, "the tone of shame, the tone of guilt, the tone of frustration, the tone of failure, do not reflect the truth as God has revealed it! Instead, the Bible speaks in vibrant tones of victory won. And so must we! The Bible speaks in tones of hope and expectation. As so must we" (Richards 1980, 301).

Educational ministry of the Church is another means of carrying out the Great Commission. This ministry includes such programmes and efforts as discipleship, which some execute through catechism or baptismal class and which are often very useful in building converts in their Christian understanding and characters (Ferris 2000, 303). Discipleship, however, goes beyond helping new converts to grow; it is a continuous effort of the Church to help her members become like Christ for as long as they are here on earth. It is actually one of the cardinal purposes of the church (Warren 1995, 103-109). Other church educational ministries are Sunday School; small group Bible studies; children, teens, youth, and adult ministries; and, several others, depending on denomination and leadership.

Another one of the vital means of education in the Great Commission is theological education. This is the process through which men and women are trained for Christian ministry. Theological education includes seminaries, Bible schools and colleges, and in many cases Theological Education by Extension (TEE). Pastors conferences have also been considered a strong means of continuous education, and they offer "a unique opportunity for both trained and untrained church leaders to receive stimulus and instructions aimed at developing their ministries" (Ferris 2000, 303).

Public education and educational services, at whatever level, and in whatever forms, have been tools in the hands of modern protestant missionaries to reach out with the Great Commission. In India, one of the penetrating points for William Carey in 1793 was the ability to learn and translate the Bible into several Indian languages, then establish schools for instruction in these languages (Ferris 2000, 304). Alexandar Duff in 1830 also reached out to the Indian upper castes through European Secondary Schools and Universities. The government later got involved, which became a blessing for the mission work (Ferris 2000, 304). In Japan, before 1873, education was the only type of mission work permitted. In the Middle East, mission-founded universities were held in high regard. In sub-Saharan Africa, the principal sources of education into the 1960s were either the "bush schools" led by indigenous pastors and catechists or mission schools, both virtually at the primary level (Ferris 2000, 304). The education service of the Church has opened many doors to resistant people groups, and still today education remains one of the keys through which the Great Commission can penetrate unreached hinterlands in several nations. Missionaries penetrate various areas as English teachers, development workers, agricultural experts, and social workers, for example (Ferris, 2000, 303).

There are a few problems that mission works encounter in terms of educational outreach. One of them is the association (at least in Africans' minds) of mission schools with colonialism. Some societies also can no longer see what used to be a clear connection between education and Christian values (Ferris 2000, 304). The ultimate goal of Christian schools should be the transformation of people and societies.: "Whether you teach in a preschool, public elementary school, high school, youth group, adult Sunday School class, private Christian school, or a state university, in the end, the goal of the intentional educator is to help persons become" (Galindo 2004, 15). There must, therefore, be a continuous engagement of Christian minds with how not to make education counterproductive to the goal of the Great Commission, which should be the winning of souls and transformation of lives and societies.

Engaging Orality in Education and the Great Commission

Among several interventions to make the education means of the Great Commission effective is the engagement of orality. Orality at its very basic level signifies a situation where "there is reliance on spoken communication rather than written" (Ajibade 2018, 52). With the classification of oral learners as primary, residual, and secondary by Walter Ong, it is on record that some "5.7 billion people in the world are oral communicators because either they are illiterate or their reading comprehension is inadequate" (Ong 1983, 10; Lovejoy 2012, 29). Put differently, over 80 percent of the adults, teenagers, and children in the world are likely to be oral communicators (Lovejoy 2012, 31). That amount is quite huge and significant, both for the Great Commission and education as a means of prosecuting the Great Commission.

The implications are multifarious. Having considered some of the types of education that have been engaged in prosecuting the Great Commission, it is also important to see how orality could be employed while exploring these engagements. Some of the most popular or useful components of orality have been identified as drama, drumming, dancing, poetry, folktales, myths, storytelling, arts, proverbs, and idioms (Ajibade 2018, 100). Such a list is not exhaustive, depending on culture and perspectives.

Beginning with preaching as a Great Commission educational event, orality should be engaged. Preaching can be one of the most exciting, and at the same time one of the most boring and incomprehensive, elements in a worship experience, depending on how it is handled. While

preaching should be an exposition of the Scripture that is well applied to contemporary listeners, oral elements such as songs, drama, proverbs, folktale, and storytelling can be well engaged to interpret, illustrate, or apply the Scriptures. For Africans especially, such oral means are their fundamental communication paradigm, and a good preacher cannot do without them. The need for engaging orality is also an invitation to place emphasis on narrative preaching. According to Ezekiel Ajibade, oral elements actually remain as great options for African preaching, since African orality can find full expression considering its "heritage of celebration, participation, dialogue, expression through myth, songs, stories and drama, prophetic utterances, and faith healings" (Ajibade 2018, 91).

Christian education, either in its evangelistic vision or discipleship mission, cannot jettison orality and oral elements. One of the most exciting Christian education conferences this writer has attended was themed, "Edutainment: Connecting with Learners for Transformation," anchored by Jerry Akinsola at Bowen University in Iwo, Nigeria, a few years ago. Akinsola has defined *Edutainment* as "the imaginative approaches teachers use to make learning more interesting, engaging, exciting and effective"; and, "the process of engaging learners' interest in interactive and applicable learning activities that would enable them live [sic] in ways that would exalt Christ" (Akinsola n.d., 6). Akinsola's goals were to expose the participants to how they could speak the "learning language" of visual, audio, kinetic, and verbal learners, help move the brain from the passive to the active mode to enable the participation of all those involved, enliven learning, deepen retention, and encourage application (Akinsola n.d., 7). To achieve these goals, Akinsola simply exposed the participants to *edutainment* using music, *edutainment* using creative arts, *edutainment* using games, and *edutainment* using drama (Akinsola n.d., 11-21). The only word Akinsola did not mention was "orality," but all he had done in that conference was to teach Christian educators how to engage orality in Christian education. That conference was an excellent example of how to make Christian education effective through the use of orality.

Theological education, which is the third main means of education in the Great Commission as discussed in this article, will also be more effective if orality is engaged—especially in a continent like Africa, as in all oral contexts. Emmanuel Chemengich has observed that "Oralities approaches to learning has direct and indirect implications for theological education that include, curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and educational assessments" (Chemengich 2016, 45). He also, however, emphasises that several people serving in African church ministry contexts today have to engage oral approaches in order to be effective while several others are struggling after their theological education to balance between the "formal, literacy approaches they learned in theological institution and the dominant orality–based ministry approaches of the African context they function in" (Chemengich 2016, 44-45). Chemengich's following three suggestions are thus very instructive.

First, theological curricula must be designed to reflect the three traditional divisions of theological training: biblical, theological, and practical—and the practical will engage the oral. Second, teaching methodologies should engage visual and audio lectures, field practical experiences, discussion groups, and presentation of findings in order to satisfy the African orality paradigm of apprenticeship, observation, practice, and community participation. Third, educational assessments need to engage both written and oral exams and allow learners to evaluate the quality of teaching based on oral presentation and lecture, rather than just course design and contents (Chemengich 2016, 44-45).

For its part, public education that will bring transformation should recognise the learning styles of learners and, at times, how the styles blend. Jayne Walters has observed that when a student is able to "construct meaning from ideas and concepts" and transfer what they learn to new situations, they are on the path of transformation (Walters 2021). But for students to get to this level, they must be engaged in learning. The reason is that "engagement is cemented in emotions" (Walters 2021). Orality and compelling stories engage emotions. Such engagement helps students to construct meaning and remember what was learned, connecting it to their personal experiences. Research shows that the brain grows dendrites that force synapses when people talk, define, or process information. In the words of Walters,

> As educators, whether in the classroom or church, we cannot afford to waste time on learning strategies that do not bring about transformation. Where a lost world is concerned, too much is at stake. Orality provides an opportunity to engage learners. When the learners hear the stories about Jesus, the most important transformation takes place, a transformation from death to life, and the most important transfer learning takes place, the gospel spreads (Walters 2021).

Conclusion

This article has looked at education and the Great Commission and how orality comes into play between the two. The Great Commission is a command to reach the entire world with the good news of Jesus Christ, and education is a veritable tool. Education would be much more effective when the elements of orality that engage learners are used. It is, therefore, a challenge for all who are involved in education for the Great Commission to evaluate and assess how education has been done—be it through preaching, Christian education, theological education, or general education. Engaging orality would be very helpful in making teaching and learning meaningful, impactful, and transformative.

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