

The Role of “The Great Commission” in the Apostolic Churches

By Stewart E. Lauer

The articular expression, “ἡ ἐντολή” (the commandment) in 1 Timothy 6:14 and the similar expression “τὴ ἅγια ἐντολή” (the holy commandment) in 2 Peter 2:21 appear in the flows of these two epistles with no antecedent commandment having been identified, that is, with no preceding contextual mention of a particular ἐντολή. Notwithstanding, each author presupposes his original readers would easily, if not automatically, recognize the particular commandment to which he refers. We begin by addressing two questions regarding each instance. What ‘commandment’ (or some have suggested, despite the singular, ‘body of commandments’) is in view, and how did each author expect his readers to know that identity?

The following study of this term in these two epistolary contexts pivots on the fact—as will be shown—that both letters employ the articular construction, “the commandment,” and that despite the fact that in both cases it is the first appearance of that noun in its context.

What Commandment?—Common Answers

IN THE CASE OF 2 PETER 2:21 (AND 3:2)

As to this first question, in the case of 2 Peter, most assert the antecedent of the 3:2 instance to be in 2:21, where they exegete “the holy commandment” along the lines of Calvin: “the doctrine of a holy and virtuous life”; Green: “the moral law which Jesus underlined in his Sermon on the Mount”; Bauckham: “Christianity considered as a body of ethical teaching”; and Davids: “the teaching of Jesus and about Jesus.”¹ ‘Commandment’ (ἐντολή) is thereby taken to have a sense normally expressed by ‘law’ (νόμος): “Christ has given a ‘new law’ for his disciples (see Justin, *Dial.* 12.2).”² According to this interpretation, ‘the holy rule’ [τὴ ἅγια ἐντολή] is taken as parallel with ‘the way of righteousness’ [τὴν ὁδὸν τῆς

δικαιοσύνης],” with the latter functioning exegetically with respect to the former.³ By this understanding, when the false teachers opposed in 2 Peter 2 “had come to Christ they had received a ‘holy commandment.’” Thus, the way of righteousness, “the sacred commandment . . . was passed on to them” (παραδοθεῖσιν αὐτοῖς) when they were baptized.⁴

IN THE CASE OF 1 TIMOTHY 6:14FF

The widespread similarity of opinions with respect to Peter’s referent for ‘the commandment’ stands in stark contrast with the uncertainty and diversity of suggestions evident for ἡ ἐντολή in the case of 1 Timothy 6:14. “The primary question regarding the verse is the identity of the ἐντολή, ‘commandment.’”⁵ On 6:13–14, Fee’s

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1. See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Second Epistle of Peter*, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. XXII, trans. John Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844–56; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 411; Michael Green, *The Second Epistle General of Peter and the General Epistle of Jude* (London: Tyndale Press, 1993), 142; Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude–2 Peter* (Dallas: Word, 1983), 278. Regarding 3:2, Bauckham opines: “The ‘commandment’ is used here in the same way as in 2:21” (p. 288). Cf., also, Peter H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 251.

2. Jerome H. Neyrey, *2 Peter, Jude* (NYC: Doubleday, 1993), 224.

3. Davids, 251.

4. Davids, 251.

5. William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 359.

ironic final clause is striking, “Most of the difficulties in understanding the paragraph stem from this charge, which is at once quite ambiguous, yet the point of everything.”⁶ Fee notes five different possibilities for 6:14’s ‘ambiguous’ commandment:

1. the exhortations in verses 11–12, collectively understood;
2. an alleged baptismal charge to which allusion is made in verse 12;
3. an ordination charge;
4. the whole Christian faith thought of as a kind of new law; or
5. a commandment to Timothy to persevere in his own faith and ministry, as in 4:16, so as to save himself and others.⁷

To these Knight adds three more:

1. the whole charge delivered in this letter ...
2. all Timothy has been enjoined to do with respect to the ministry of the gospel and the government of the church ...
3. everything entrusted to Timothy, by analogy with the “deposit” in 6:20....

He continues: “six of the eight views would virtually coincide in their understanding of *the content* of the ‘commandment.’” By the above numbering those six would be (2) through (5), (7) and (8). Knight rightly notes that the other 2 (above 1, 6) “would seem to require that the text read ‘this,’ rather than ‘the,’ commandment.” He also notes “the definiteness and absoluteness of the phrase ‘the commandment,’” highlighting the significance of the (definite) article.⁸ Has that significance of the article

6. Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1990), 151.

7. Fee, 151.

8. George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 266–68, italics original. Knight’s numbering for 6, 7, 8 is 5, 6, 7, respectively.

9. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 217–18; emphasis added.

10. Green, 142.

11. Bauckham, 288.

been given adequate attention, and precisely what is its use, here? In 2 Peter 2:21?

IDENTIFYING THE ARTICLE’S USAGE

The most frequent use of the article clearly does not fit in either the 1 Timothy 6 instance or the 2 Peter 2 instance; Wallace explains that “most common use” of the Greek (definite) article:

The anaphoric article is the article denoting previous reference. (It derives its name from the Greek verb ἀναφέρειν, “to bring back, to bring up.”) The first mention of the substantive is usually anarthrous because it is merely being introduced. But subsequent mentions of it use the article, for the article is now pointing back to *the substantive previously mentioned*. The anaphoric article has, by nature, then, a pointing force to it, reminding the reader of who or what was mentioned previously. *It is the most common use of the article and the easiest usage to identify.*⁹

Strictly speaking, the two instances in question do not fall into this (anaphoric) category since *both constitute the first mention of the substantive*, ἐντολή, and yet both are articular.

As is often the case with exegetical problems in NT epistles, the authors and recipients were privy to information to which (much) later readers often have no access, or at least no direct access. Apparently in these two cases, that information includes the identity or identities of what at that time could be identified by merely writing, “the [holy] commandment.” Commentators on both letters strive to overcome our ignorance on this point.

For example, explicating 2 Peter 2:21, Green recognizes this usage is “unusual,” adding, “but paralleled in 3:2; 1 Tim. 6:14; 1 John 3:23.”¹⁰ While the former references are germane, the final is not, since that verse itself expressly identifies (cataphorically references) an “ἐντολή,” to wit, “this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (ESV). In 2 Peter 3:2, like 1 Timothy 6, ‘commandment’ is modified by the (definite) article, though in the Petrine context it naturally points the reader back to 2:21’s ‘commandment’—one forsaken by the false teachers, that is, “the holy commandment [which had been] delivered to them” (2:21).¹¹ As in the instance in 1 Timothy, so in 2 Peter, “The primary question regarding the verse is the identity of the ἐντολήν,

‘commandment.’”¹² Despite the semblance of agreement on the identity of “the holy commandment” in 2 Peter 2:21, it is still an open question, for it is the first appearance of ἐντολή, and yet it is articular.

Having noted that the most common use of the article does not apply to either 2 Peter 2 or 1 Timothy 6, three other usages of the Greek article Wallace identifies merit consideration: (1) the “par excellence article,” (2) the “monadic article,” and (3) the “well-known, celebrity, or familiar article,” with (3) being defined as follows,

The article [usage (3)] points out an object that is well known, but for reasons *other* than the above categories (i.e., not anaphoric, deictic, *par excellence*, or monadic). Thus it refers to a well-known object that has not been mentioned in the preceding context (anaphoric), nor is considered to be the best of its class (*par excellence*), nor is one of a kind (monadic).¹³

Since obviously there are various divine commandments that Peter and Paul could have mentioned, monadic usage may be excluded. Unless ‘the commandment’ is that of Deuteronomy 6:5—precluded by considerations below—it seems impossible that “the [holy] commandment” could be viewed as “the best of its class,” i.e., the best commandment (cf. Mat 22:37 and parallels). That leaves “well-known” usage as the presumptive reason for the article modifying ἐντολή—in both 1 Timothy 6:14 and 2 Peter 2:21, with the referent repeated in 2 Peter 3:1–2, where the commandment’s article’s usage is anaphoric. Mounce implies well-known usage of the article: “The articular τὴν ἐντολήν, ‘the commandment,’ suggests something of independent existence that is *well known*.”¹⁴ Indeed, the fact that different authors presume their (different) readers will intuitively recognize the particular commandment to which each refers by the articular expression constitutes additional confirmation that “the [holy] commandment” had a specific meaning, one that was well known by that appellation among multiple apostolic churches.¹⁵

An example of the use of the English definite article, “the,” vividly illustrates this (very similar) Greek usage. If one uses the term, “the white house”—absent any prior reference to a particular white house—in oral communication with virtually any native English speaking person from any country worldwide, the reference will be immediately understood, and that without the *hearer* knowing the modified words normally begin with upper case letters. The term, with its precise referent, is simply so “well-known” worldwide that, with

the definite article but no prior contextual mention, it is effectively a proper noun.

In short, it seems that “ἡ ἐντολή” (the commandment) was similarly so well-known in the first century church that Paul and Peter could use the term and assume that their readers—Timothy in one case, and some specific church or group of churches in the other¹⁶—would instantly know to what commandment each author was referring.

While hypothetically by “the [holy] commandment” Peter and Paul might be referring to differing commandments, virtually by definition the “well-known” use of the Greek article implies that both are likely referring to same commandment—then famous in the milieu of some (or all) apostolic churches. Indeed, Thayer believes all three instances have a common referent (he supports the most common view of that identity), “ἡ ἐντολή, collectively, of the whole body of the moral precepts of Christianity; 1 Tim. vi.14; 2 Pet. ii.21; iii.2.”¹⁷ It is, at minimum, logical that one begin the search for the referent commandment(s) by assuming that all three instances refer to “the [same well-known] commandment.” If this assumption is correct, it should tend to be vindicated by pinpointing one commandment (or body of commandments) that plausibly fits all three contexts.

Despite Thayer’s recognition of a common referent, most interpreters implicitly, if not explicitly, seem to study the Pauline and Petrine instances separately, that is, in isolation from each other. They search the nearer or broader context for demands Paul is making on Timothy, or other evidence of fault for which Peter is accusing the false teachers who are the subject of 2 Peter 2. Yet, if the referents are identical, they may surely be analyzed together, collecting data from all three contexts. Then,

12. Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1990), 130. Mounce agrees on this question’s primacy (p 359).

13. Wallace, 225.

14. Commenting on 1 Timothy 6:14: Mounce, 359; italics added.

15. Wallace (p 225) offers six instances from a variety of NT literature where the article’s usage falls into the category, “well-known”: Matthew 13:55, Galatians 4:22, James 1:1, 2 John 1, 3 John 15, and Acts 2:42.

16. Under the rubric, “Destination and Audience,” D. A. Carson and D. Moo opine, “the lack of specifics led Christians in the past to classify 2 Peter as a ‘general’ or ‘catholic’ letter, it being thought that it was addressed generally to the church worldwide. But the letter suggests a definite and restricted destination”; *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 663–64. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (NYC: Doubleday, 1997), 768.

17. Joseph Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1889), s.v.

if a single hypothesis for the referent fits all three well, one may surely be more confident of its correctness than if he analyzes each letter on its own.

Furthermore, the usual exegetical strategy presumes *not* that the readers already know the identity of ‘the commandment,’ but rather that the authors expect them to infer that identity from context. Such appears to be the case in exegetical suggestions (1), (2), (5), (6) and (7) for interpreting 1 Timothy 6:14, listed above. In the case of 2 Peter 2:21, the usual approach is to define ‘the commandment’ by the expression τὴν ὁδὸν τῆς δικαιοσύνης, earlier in the verse. For example, “‘The holy commandment’ is here used in the same way as ‘the way of righteousness.’”¹⁸ In any event, the most common approaches to these instances treat the article more like “anaphoric instances” than “well-known” ones. Assuming the usages are indeed “well-known,” rather than expecting to find some sort of antecedent for “the commandment” in the immediate or broader context, it makes more sense simply to look for how it is used in the three contexts.

What Commandment?—Discerning Its Characteristics from Context

2 PETER 2:21 AND 3:1–2

“The main reason for writing [2 Peter] is the appearance of false teachers in the community (2:1–3).”¹⁹ In fact, the whole of chapter 2 is about false teachers. In 1:16–18 Peter recalls the true teaching, his apostolic testimony to the “power and coming” of Christ. Then, in 2:1ff, that authentic eyewitness testimony is contrasted with the insidious error promulgated by imposters: “But . . . there will also be false teachers among you,” and ends with two vivid metaphors likening those teachers’ behavior to that of unclean animals—pigs and dogs—returning to mire and vomit, respectively. Despite frequent interpretation of 2:21 as (only) about simple apostasy, the context leading up to v 21, vv 1–20, is about false teachers, as vv 14, 25, and 18 clearly show. If 2:21’s “turning away from the holy commandment” and abandoning the “way of righteousness,” were referring to apostasy from that ‘way,’ as many assert, why would Peter have not simply written, “it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having

known it to turn away from it,” or the like? Indeed, 3:3ff, too, warn about those who raise doubts about the return of Christ, which is also false teaching.

To be sure, the false teachers are (also) apostate, as 2:21a and 2:22 indicate. Nevertheless, the focus of the letter, like that of a previous sending (3:1), is not to win *them* back to the truth, but to warn and protect those whom they teach (3:9)—those to whom both letters have been sent—with respect to their deviant doctrine. It is the corruption of their teaching, their service *as teachers* in the church that is at the heart of Peter’s concern. As such, it seems “the holy commandment” that had been “passed on” (NRSV) or “delivered” (ESV) (παραδοθείσης) to them, but from which they have now “turned away” is presumably a command pertaining to their teaching duties, an understanding evident in Fee’s interpretive suggestions (3) and (5), above.

The verb παραδίδωμι is “a religious technical term for passing along traditions, decisions, teachings.” Here it is a commandment that is delivered to the teachers pertaining to their teaching. Since Peter labels “the commandment” “holy” or “sacred,” one may infer that Peter believes the command to be God-given. Moreover, since we are assuming the commandment of 3:2 to be the same, then the holy commandment is Jesus-given: “the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles” (ESV, 3:2). So the commandment is one given by Jesus, through the apostles, to the churches’ teachers, and it pertains to their teaching.

Furthermore, we can infer something about the commandment’s content from 2:21; the commandment is one that compels teachers to teach, “the way of righteousness,” since *by their false teaching* (contrary to that way) these teachers have “turn[ed] away from the holy commandment delivered to them.” The commandment must be an imperative from lips of Christ charging teachers to teach the way of righteousness. That commandment was formally delivered to them when they became teachers, making adherence their personal responsibility, but as Peter writes, these false teachers have now “turn[ed] away from the holy commandment delivered to them” (2:21 NASB).

1 TIMOTHY 6:14–16

Very similar to the purpose of 2 Peter, 1 Timothy’s “author is concerned [in 1:3–3:16], as he is throughout the letter, largely (but not exclusively) with the question of heresy in the church and the antidote to it.”²⁰ “This injunction [6:13–16] rounds off the whole content of the letter as solemn instruction to Timothy.”²¹ It should

18. Bauckham, 278. See also Davids, cited above.

19. Carson/Moo, 657.

20. I. Howard Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 359; emphasis added.

21. Marshall, 661.

come as no surprise, then, that Paul would, in a section of the letter in which “true and false teachers [are] contrasted,”²² charge Timothy that he should keep the same teaching-related commandment away from which Peter declares such heretical teachers have fallen (2 Peter 2:21), and that the church to whom Peter writes (that is being troubled by them), “should remember” that same commandment (2 Peter 3:2).

1 Timothy 6:14ff reveals additional information about “the commandment”: first, the duty to keep it has an expiration date, that is, “the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14b)—something that cannot be said about most major commandments in Scripture. This is by no means trivial or coincidental. For Paul spends the next two verses heavily emphasizing Christ’s sovereignty over the date of his return.

Finally, there is a notable difference between the way in which Peter urges the church to whom he writes to respond to “the commandment,” over against the way Paul urges Timothy to do so. Peter explains his purpose in this (and also a prior) letter is to

“sti[r] up your sincere mind ... *that you should remember* ... the commandment”

Paul writes: “I charge you ... *that you keep* the commandment”

An Apostle urges the members of a church (merely) to remember “the commandment,” but another (calling God and Christ as witnesses) binds Timothy actually to keep it. So, for Timothy, the commandment is duty, for ordinary church members, it is important to remember, but they are not personally bound to it as duty. Furthermore, it had been ‘delivered’ to the (now) false teachers—presumably at ordination—who have since forsaken it.

Here is a list of characteristics about this commandment deduced from the two letters that refer to it. It,

1. imposes a duty on teachers to teach “the way of righteousness”
2. originated as a command given by Jesus to his Apostles
3. is important to other members of the church, but they are not personally bound to keep it
4. was very well known, at least in the Apostolic churches

5. was formally delivered to the churches’ teachers when they became teachers, thereby making adherence their personal responsibility

6. remains binding upon the churches’ teachers until Christ returns

What Commandment?

—Searching the Gospels and Acts

As a well-known commandment of the Lord Jesus—known both to Peter and his readers and to Paul and his (Timothy/Ephesian churches)—one might expect it to have made its way into the canonical Gospels. Only two places in Matthew through Acts record such imperatives coming from the lips of the Lord (cf. 2 Peter 3:2) and commanding those charged to give instruction: Matthew 28:19–20 and Mark 16:15–16. The latter appears in the Majority Text, but is rejected as spurious by critical texts such as Nestle-Aland (NA). However, even if one accepts the Majority Text’s longer ending for Mark, the imperative in Mark is κηρύξαιτε (‘preach’ or ‘proclaim’); of the two, only Matthew 28:19f explicitly mentions “teaching” (διδάσκοντες), a participle carrying imperatival force from the command, “make disciples (μαθητεύσατε).”²³ Hence the TEV reasonably renders the participles as imperatives in vv 19–20 “baptize!” and “teach!”:

Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age.

In short, Matthew 28:19–20 records Jesus commanding his Apostles to teach everything he had commanded them previously. As such, the verses commonly labeled “the Great Commission” are the better candidate for the referent of τῆ ἐντολή.

1. Moreover, the Great Commission manifests or is consonant with all 6 characteristics found above to be present in “the commandment” of 2 Peter 2 and 3, and 1 Timothy 6:

22. 1 Tim 6:2b–21a. Marshall, x.

23. “The commission itself is given by means of one main imperative verb, μαθητεύσατε, “make disciples,” together with three syntactically subordinate participles that take on an imperatival force ... because of the main verb”; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (Dallas: Word, 1995), 886.

2. Clearly, the Great Commission imposes a duty on teachers to teach “the way of righteousness,” since it requires those bound by it to teach disciples “to obey everything [Jesus] ha[s] commanded” (NIV). “V. 20 interprets Jesus as the authoritative bringer of revelation: he brings the *nova lex* ... which embraces the *antiqua lex*: [Mat]5:17–20; cf. Eusebius, *Dem[onstratio] Ev[angelica]* 24c.”²⁴ “‘Righteousness’ for Matthew finds its final and authoritative definition in the teaching of Jesus, who is the *one* teacher (23:8, 10).” According to Matthew’s Gospel that is a “righteousness that surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees” (Mat 5:20).

3. As presented in Matthew 28, the command of vv 19–20 originated as a command given by Jesus to his Apostles: “the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, ... And Jesus came up and spoke to them” (Mat 28:16, 18).

4. As recorded in Matthew, the Great Commission was delivered to the eleven living Apostles of Christ. It is obviously important to the churches to keep *in mind*, since it is by its teachers keeping it that the church will be built and its members will be discipled and saved (cf. 1 Tim 4:16; Jas 1:21), but the Apostles alone were *personally* commanded to “keep” it in practice.

5. That the Great Commission was well known in the Apostolic churches is apparent from Pentecost day. Putting aside Mark 16, Matthew 28 reports the only recorded institution of Christian baptism by Christ in the New Testament, and according to the record of Acts 2, all 12 Apostles of Christ were involved in the baptism of 3000 people on that first day alone (vv 42–43). Furthermore, according to Acts 8, they remained in Jerusalem even when most of the Jerusalem church was scattered following the martyrdom of Stephen. The evidence of admission to the church being by

baptism (“... were baptized, there were added”), beginning from Pentecost, is best accounted for by the Great Commission having been well known and practiced by all the Apostles, from the very beginning of the church. According to Acts 2, they did exactly what Jesus had (recently) charged them to do: the Apostles made disciples by baptizing (v 41) and then teaching (v 42).

6. That the duties of teachers are not inherent in simply being a Christian is evidenced in the warning of James 3:1, since it is only the teachers who “will incur a stricter judgment,” presumably pertaining to how they have carried out those duties. Jesus personally bound his eleven Apostles to obey the Great Commission, but subsequent teachers are bound to it upon their ordination. Timothy is a good example: “by the laying on of hands by the presbytery” (1 Tim 4:14b), Timothy received a gift (χάρισμα). “What is surely meant is the spiritual gift to enable Timothy to perform his specific task in the church.”²⁵ That task clearly involves teaching, and other forms of oral instruction (1 Tim 4:15–16; 2 Tim 4:1–3).

7. The expiration date on “the commandment,” namely, “the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ,” is implied in the Great Commission, since Matthew 28:20 concludes with, ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος (until the end of the age). Even though the prepositional phrase is generally construed with nearest finite verb, εἰμι (I am), rather than directly modifying, and hence limiting, the imperatival μαθητεύσατε (make disciples), several considerations indicate that it implicitly also limits the earlier verb: (A) “In context,” the function of the promise of the presence of Christ is to assure “the successful completion of the mission.”²⁶ Thus, the promise of the presence of Christ until the end of the age, i.e. the return of Christ (cf. Mat 24:3) implies the (successful) end of the mission. “The time for the disciples to act in Jesus’ stead is bounded on one side by the commission of the resurrected Jesus and on the other side by his final eschatological role.”²⁷ (B) If the effective force of the phrase is truly to modify the promise of the presence of Christ with his church, why would he imply that he will no longer be present with them after he returns. Thus, the phrase is effectively to be understood as modifying the imperatival, “make disciples.”

24. W.D. Davies, and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Vol. III (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 686, fn 48.

25. Marshall, 564–65.

26. R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1119.

27. John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1271. Matthew 24:3 reads, “what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age (αἰῶνος),” effectively identifying the latter with the former; see Nolland, 961.

To summarize, the three references to “the commandment,” two in 2 Peter and 1 in 1 Timothy, are all to what we call “the Great Commission.” Apparently, to the apostolic churches it was well known simply as “the commandment.”

A ‘loose end’ remains with identifying “the commandment” of 2 Peter 3:2 with the Great Commission, that is, the meaning of 2 Peter 3:2’s expression, τῶν προειρημένων ῥημάτων ὑπὸ τῶν ἁγίων προφητῶν (lit. the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets). On the face of things, v 2 declares this and a previous letter to have as their identical purpose provoking the recipient church to remember two things:

that you should remember [1] the predictions of the holy prophets and [2] the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, (ESV)

However, the problem is solved if one recalls that, according to Luke 24:46–47, Jesus taught that the (Old Testament) Scriptures predicted not only “that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead” (prophecies already fulfilled as Jesus spoke), but “that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations.” Nolland opines, “this activity too has been anticipated in the Scriptures (cf. Acts 13:47; 15:15–18).”²⁸ In other words, what the OT predicted was to be fulfilled by obedience to “the commandment.”²⁹ What else can we learn about its role in the churches of the first century A.D.?

The Role of “The Commandment” in the Apostolic Churches

The fact that the Great Commission came to be so well known as to be distinguished from other commandments merely by a preceding definite article highlights its centrality in the life of the churches of the first century A.D. The commandment was “delivered” to new teachers, presumably at their ordination through the laying on of hands by other elders, empowering and compelling them to make disciples of others by the dual means of baptizing and teaching. What was previously the duty of others, going back to the apostles, becomes the work and mission of the newly ordained teacher. Members of a church vexed by teachers who were no longer teaching the true message, were repeatedly reminded by Peter to take the commandment to heart, presumably as he sought to have them replace the apostate, false teachers with faithful ones. Similarly, Paul ‘re-charges’ Timothy, whom he had previously

ordained, to keep the commandment as he, too, deals with false teachers (1 Tim 1:3–7), disciplining them as needed (5:19–20), and replacing them with qualified ones (1 Tim 3:1–7; 5:22). It would seem that what we call the Great Commission was the heart of the ordination vows taken by new teachers, committing themselves to keep the commandment Christ had personally imposed upon the church’s 12 original teachers. Out of respect to the (normative) example of Christ and his Apostles, churches today ought to consider modifying their ordination vows so as to give Matthew 28:19–20 the same central role it had in defining the duties, work and authority both for the Apostles and for those whom they ordained to disciple the nations.

On a final note, the teaching of the Westminster Confession of Faith that those being baptized are “to be baptized, ... by a minister of the Gospel, lawfully called thereunto” (28.2), is supported not only by Matthew 28:19 and 20, both given by the assembly as proof texts, but also by the import of that commandment evident in the foregoing exegesis of “the commandment” in 1 Timothy and 2 Peter. It is in ordination to the ministry that both the duty and the authority to make disciples is personalized to the ordinand. ■

28. John Nolland, *Luke 18:35–24:53* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993), 1244.

29. Peter seems to show an awareness of this understanding of OT prophecies in 1 Peter 1:10–12.

In Brief: James Ussher, The Infallible Marks of a True Visible Church.

What are the marks and infallible notes, whereby to discern a true visible Church with which we may safely join?

First, and principally, the truth of doctrine which is professed, and the sincere preaching of the Word, together with the due administration of the sacraments, according to the commandments of Christ our Saviour (Matt. 28:19, 20).

Secondarily, the right order which is kept, with sincere and conscionable obedience yielded to the Word of God.

Why do you make the first to be the principal mark of visible profession?

Because they are the only outward means appointed of God for the calling and gathering of His Saints, and which prove the Church to be a pillar of truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

Can the Church want this, and yet be a Church?

Yea; it may want these in the time of war or persecution; and in such a time we may safely join ourselves to a company which allows of the public ministry of the Word of God, and administration of the sacraments; howsoever the exercise of the same by reason of these garboils [turmoils] are wanting for a time.

Are we to join with all Churches that have these marks?

Yea; neither must we separate from them any farther then they separate from Christ (Phil. 1:18; Song of Sol. 1:5), as shall be shown.

What say you to the other notes that are commonly given of the Church?

Either they are accidental, and in great part separable, or utterly impertinent and forged, for the upholding of the Romish synagogue.

But is not antiquity a certain note of the Church?

No; for errors are very ancient, and the Church when it began, was a Church; yet had no antiquity.

Is not multitude a note?

No; for Christ's flock is a little flock (Luke 12:32), and Antichrist very great (Rev. 13:4, 8; 18:3).

Are not miracles a mark of the Church?

No; for beside that wicked people may work them (Matt. 7:22, 23), the Church of Christ hath been without miracles, and the coming of Antichrist is foretold to be with all power, and signs, and lying wonders (2 Thess. 2:9; Rev. 13:13, 14). Such as those are whereof the Papiests brag and boast of, which are indeed no true miracles.

Whether the Church may err.

May the Church err and be corrupted, or fall, and become no Church?

First, we must distinguish of errors: some are fundamental, such as raze the foundation of the Church (as the denying that Christ came in the flesh, or the denying of the resurrection) and in these the Church cannot err; others are of less moment, and in these it may erre.

Secondly, the Catholic Church, considered in her true

members, can never utterly fall (Matt. 16:18; Psalm 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:24). Howsoever no Congregation be so pure, that it may be said at any time to be free from all corruption (Song of Sol. 1:4), or so constant, but that at times it may be shaken in the very foundation of truth, as it may appear by the Church of Corinth, Galatia, etc. (1 Cor. 15:12, 13; Gal. 3:1).

Thirdly, the Church being considered with respect of the place, God doth not always continue a succession of true believers within the same limits and borders; and hence we say, that divers Churches are fallen, as those of Asia, etc. Neither is any place so privileged, but that for sin the candlestick may in time be thence removed (Rev. 2:5).

How may we judge of a Church corrupt, or ceasing to be a Church?

Where God utterly taking away the means of His Word and Worship (Acts 13:46), hath apparently given the bill of divorce (Isa. 50:1), there are we not to acknowledge any Church at all, as at this day in Jerusalem, once the holy city: But where these means are yet continued, we are to acknowledge a Church of Christ (Rev. 2:12, 13), howsoever more or less corrupt, according to the greater or less abuse of God's Word and Worship.

In what cases we may separate from a corrupt Church

Since Churches may be so diversely corrupted, from which, and how far are we to separate?

From Churches mortally sick of heresy (Titus 3:10, 11), or idolatry, as it were a contagious plague or leprosy, we are to separate (Rev. 18:4). Howbeit whiles there is yet any life, rather from the scab or sore then from the body; that is, from the prevailing faction, maintaining fundamental errors, and forcing to idolatrous worship: Such is our separation from the present Church of Rome, not from such therein, who either meaning well in general, are ignorant of the depth of Satan (Rev. 2:24), or secretly dissent from the damnable corruptions (1 Kings 19:18), with whom, as a body yet retaining life, we desire to join (Phil. 1:18), so far as we may with safety from the foresaid contagion.

Are we to continue fellowship with all other Churches, not so deadly and dangerously corrupt?

From Churches holding the foundation in substance of faith and worship, though otherwise not free from blemish, we are not to separate (1 Kings 15:14, 22:43), farther than in dislike and refusal of that wherein they do apparently separate from Christ, in respect either of manners, doctrine, or form of public worship.

James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie* (1645), 397–398, text modernized. *A Body of Divinity* is unquestionably Ussher's work. See Harrison Perkins, "Manuscript and Material Evidence for James Ussher's Authorship of *A Body of Divinitie* (1645)," *Evangelical Quarterly* 89.2 (2018): 133–161, and extensive new evidence is forthcoming in Harrison Perkins (ed.), *James Ussher's Theological Manuscripts: Critical Texts and Commentary* (Reformed Historical Theology Series; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, forthcoming). ■