

**A STATEMENT RECOGNIZING EARLY ERRORS AND WEAKNESSES
IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GREAT COMMISSION
ASSOCIATION OF CHURCHES
July, 1991**

INTRODUCTION

The Great Commission Association of Churches (GCAC), formerly Great Commission International (GCI), is an association of evangelical Christian churches in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and Asia. Most of these churches are less than twenty years old and originated with a group of Christians at Southern Colorado University who set out to preach the Gospel and so fulfill the Great Commission, the last command of the Lord Jesus Christ to "Go . . . and make disciples of all the nations." From Colorado, they reached out to other campuses across the country, so that there were fifteen loosely affiliated student fellowships by 1973, thirty-two campus or community churches by 1981, and seventy-six churches at the present time. The goal of those few men, and of the men and women who eventually chose to labor with them, was to "reach the world" with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their generation and in doing so, glorify Him. To reach that goal, they modeled their churches as nearly as possible after the New Testament church, and took literally the Lord's command to "Go." As the name of our association suggests, it is and has been our constant goal and desire to help fulfill the Great Commission, and consequently, the churches in the Association have always been characterized by a strong commitment to witnessing and evangelism.

Over the years, our churches have been used by God to see thousands of people come to know Christ, grow in their love for Him, and go on to faithfully serve Him. But just as a young person growing up will make many mistakes on the road to maturity, so our churches, in the process of growing up in the Lord, made mistakes, exhibited weaknesses, and allowed a prideful attitude to develop, in part, as a result of our immaturity. In addition, the churches experienced a number of problems inherent in starting a new church or association of churches. These problems were exacerbated by our youth, our focus on evangelism and a failure to adequately recognize other spiritual gifts, and the fact that even very early on we had many churches and no clear organizational structure to formalize their relationships with one another. Some of the problems were minor while others were more serious in nature. Some of the problems were a result of the actions of local church leaders and so were

isolated both in time and place. Others were a consequence of mistakes by leaders who had influence in many of the churches, and so were widespread. Many of the problems were resolved years ago, others were resolved more recently, and some are currently being addressed. And because we realize that our churches and leaders, while doing our best to follow the Lord's leading, will make mistakes in the future, we are in the process of developing a Book of Government to formalize procedures on how to approach and respond to those mistakes and grievances.

We, the local pastors and national leaders of the Great Commission Association of Churches, are preparing this statement with the hope that we might accomplish three goals. First, it is intended to be a clear statement of the mistakes we believe we have made and the steps we have taken, and will continue to take, to rectify them. Secondly, the statement is a confession and a request for forgiveness from those who have been hurt by our errors. Finally, we have prepared this statement with the hope that it will be an important part of our plan for reconciliation, where possible, with former members, leaders, and others who, for various reasons are now estranged from us.

The mistakes made, weaknesses exhibited, and problems experienced by our churches can be roughly grouped into two categories: (I) Those that were caused by a prideful attitude; and, (II) Those that were a result of a misapplication or misinterpretation of Scripture. The balance of this statement will address the specific problems that fall within each of these two categories.

I. PRIDEFUL ATTITUDE

We confess that, especially in our early years, we had a prideful attitude about the ways we believed that our churches were distinctive from others in the body of Christ. And while, to the best of our knowledge, it was never expressly taught that we were better than other churches, it was very much implied by our too narrow view of how God accomplishes His purposes through the church. For many years, we believed that because we were committed to reaching the world with the Gospel in the way we believed was mandated by the Scriptures and that had been virtually abandoned by most Christians since the first century, that God would use our churches in a special way. This allowed a prideful attitude to develop toward other churches, para-churches, and organizations, a sinful attitude we deeply regret. It is difficult to know just how pervasive this attitude was, but we believe it was common, especially during the early years of our history. Our pride manifested itself in a variety of ways, which we now turn to.

1. Improper response to criticism.

The problem. A commitment to responding to criticism with patience, understanding, and a desire to learn is a mark of spiritual maturity. And while parties with different points of view might finally have to "agree to disagree," it is important that they first make a concerted effort to discuss and, if possible, resolve their differences. We confess that we have too often responded defensively to those both within and outside of our churches who questioned or criticized us, and at times exhibited an unwillingness to listen to their perspective. Instead of too quickly concluding that these individuals were acting divisively or irresponsibly, we should have made a greater effort to carefully consider and respond to their views. Moreover, we should have made more of an effort to pursue those individuals who had voiced various concerns about our doctrine or practices, and aggressively pursued reconciliation with former leaders and members.

Steps taken to correct. We are grieved by the rift that has developed between our churches and a number of former leaders and church members who have believed, in part because of our unwillingness to listen to them, that reconciliation was impossible. We apologize for failing to listen to their concerns and for failing at times to obey our Lord's command to be reconciled. We ask that anyone who has a concern about, or complaint against, a Great Commission church or leader to contact that church or leader. If that does not satisfactorily resolve the issue, please write to David Bovenmyer at the address noted on page 13.

Many of the most serious grievances that former leaders and members had might have been resolved many years ago if we would have had a formalized, written policy on handling complaints, addressing divergent views, and resolving grievances. That is why we are developing, as previously noted, a Book of Government that will provide that needed formality. Of course, even the best policy will be ineffective if both parties to a dispute fail to approach the dispute with love and humility. For our part, we apologize to each former leader or member who we did not respond to in a spirit of love and humility, and express our commitment to excel in this in the future.

2. An elitist attitude.

The problem. It is a truism that when one chooses something, whether a home, automobile, job, or spouse, it is usually because that person believes his choice to be the best one. It is no different with a church. Most people choose to become members of a church because that church, for a variety of reasons,

most closely reflects what the person perceives to be the "ideal" church. There is nothing wrong with that. The problem arises when one makes the subtle shift from believing that "this is the best church for me" to a conviction that "this is the best church, period." We confess that this latter belief, though never, to the best of our knowledge, publicly taught and probably only rarely expressed, infected our churches for some time. There is no simple explanation for how or why this happened, but there are a number of factors we believe were, in some way, responsible.

Perhaps the most important factor responsible for our elitist attitude was our strong conviction that God's plan to accomplish the Great Commission relied upon New Testament churches following the geographical progression described in Acts 1:8, and our belief that our churches were unique in their commitment to pursue that plan. We acknowledged that God could and did use other instruments and methods to accomplish His purposes, including para-churches, mission boards, Bible Schools, seminaries, and individuals with a particular vision. We had much respect for these individuals and organizations, often spoke highly of them, and indeed were both influenced by them and, in the case of some Billy Graham crusades and Campus Crusade outreaches, were active and enthusiastic participants with them. Nevertheless, we confess that we as leaders believed, and at times expressed, that these individuals and organizations were not necessarily doing "God's best" like we were. For our lack of humility, we apologize.

Another factor concerns the fact that in the early days of our movement, most of the men and women involved were quite young, the majority in their early twenties. Few of us were married, had children, owned homes, or had many other "worldly" responsibilities to distract us from our commitment to sharing the Gospel. Consequently, we had much time and energy to devote to our local church, and we tried to closely follow the example of the New Testament Church described in Acts 2:42:

They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (NIV)

There was a very active church life, and members were encouraged to actively pursue witnessing and evangelism.

The positive effects of living in and with a devoted, Christian community were many. Individual believers developed a closer relationship with the Lord, many non-Christians were born again, and ultimately, God received glory. But, because of our immaturity, there were negative effects as well. One was a

tendency to believe that our approach to the Christian life was not merely a "good" one, but the "best" or "only scriptural" approach. We considered those who we thought were not as zealous as we were to be "lukewarm." Instead, we should have believed and clearly taught that, "this is the way the Lord has shown us. God can and does lead differently." Another was the expectation that all believers be as actively involved as we were in sharing the Gospel and the conclusion that if they were not, they were not obeying God's perfect will for their lives. This expectation was partially a result of our pride and partially a result of our youth and ignorance of the added responsibilities that age and a family can bring.

One very negative effect concerned members who chose to leave our churches. Because of our conviction that God's plan to accomplish the Great Commission relied upon New Testament churches following the geographical progression described in Acts 1:8, and because we believed that our churches were unique in their commitment to pursuing that plan, there was a concern that a person leaving would miss out on God's will for their life. Our overemphasis on the things that we believed distinguished our churches from other churches and organizations and our failure to recognize that God might desire to use those individuals outside of our association of churches made it difficult for some to leave without feeling guilty and inadequate, or believing that God could use them for His purposes in another church. It also caused some of those who remained to view those who left as choosing something that might be good, but wasn't what was best. We deeply regret this, and express our sincere apology to those who suffered because of our pride and insensitivity.

Steps taken to correct. In the last five years, as we have come to better understand and appreciate our niche in the larger body of Christ, the elitism of our early years has, for the most part, disappeared. Still, our association of churches is committed to preventing an elitist attitude from again infecting the churches. Individuals and churches who seek to be most devoted to the Lord would seem to be, paradoxically, those most likely to be tempted to be proud and to have an elitist view. Since it is our goal individually and as churches to be devoted to the Lord, and because pride is a sin common to all people, we will need to continually be on guard against elitist attitudes.

We have committed ourselves to communicate, especially when discussing convictions or preferences that distinguish us from other Christian churches and organizations, our appreciation for those churches and organizations and for their different convictions, strategies, and methods. In addition, we are eager to learn from other Christian churches and organizations, to work with them on projects within our local communities, and to attend church

management seminars, church growth seminars, and other programs and seminars sponsored by other churches and organizations.

Concerning a member who wishes to leave a church that is part of our association, we are committed to expressing our appreciation, both verbally and in a letter, for that individual's service to the Lord while part of the church, as well as the hope that God will continue to use them in the future. In addition we will do all we can to make their departure and transition a comfortable one.

II. MISAPPLICATION OR MISINTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

God's Word, as He has revealed it to us in the Bible, is and has been the "Constitution" that our churches have been guided by since their inception. Overall, we believe we have properly interpreted and applied the Word in developing our convictions about the purpose, goals, and day-to-day operation of the church. However, we have at times in the past misapplied or misinterpreted certain verses, over and under emphasized certain principles, and failed to live up to the high standards of conduct the Scriptures command. In this section, we will address these failings.

1. Failing to distinguish between a command, a principle, and a preference.

The problem. In the past, we did not always clearly communicate the difference between a scriptural command, a scriptural principle, and a personal preference. And while it is not always easy to determine those differences, it is important to do so in order to allow individuals in the church to hold and express biblically-based convictions that are different than those of their leaders. This will promote tolerance and acceptance of alternative viewpoints and allow church members to fill their unique place in the body of Christ.

Our failure in the past to clearly distinguish between a command and a principle or preference manifested itself in a variety of ways. One example of this failure concerns our view of Acts 1:8. That verse says:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NIV)

We have believed and continue to believe that this verse is an example of the geographic progression that the New Testament church followed in their effort to take the Gospel to all nations. Moreover, we have derived from this example

a principle that we try to apply, i.e., in pursuing the Great Commission, it is wise to begin by influencing one's city for Christ (Jerusalem), then moving out geographically to one's state and nation (Judea and Samaria), and finally to other nations (the ends of the earth). Because we failed to distinguish between a command and a principle, and because we emphasized our view so strongly, we effectively elevated a strategic principle to the level of a scriptural command. The effect of this error was that we tended to view those who had a different conviction on how individual Christians were to pursue the Great Commission as not fully obeying God's perfect will for them.

Similarly, our convictions concerning the centrality of the local church as God's vehicle for evangelism and discipleship were communicated in such a way as to cause Bible schools, seminaries, and para-church organizations to be viewed as "unscriptural." We now believe that God's plan for reaching the nations is more complex than that, and that He employs and commissions Christian churches, para-churches, missions organizations, Bible schools, seminaries, and individuals in a multitude of ways to accomplish His purposes.

A third example of our failure to clearly distinguish between commands and principles concerns the area of dating. Many of us in the early years of our churches encouraged young men and women to refrain from dating until they had a fairly strong conviction that God was leading them toward marriage to a particular individual. This had some very positive results including the lack of many problems that casual dating can cause (temptation to immorality, trauma and strife because of romantic breakups, distraction from a devotion to holiness and service to the Lord) and contributed to the formation of many, many strong marriages. However, it also had negative results including alienating believers who did not share our preference and causing some who did to develop a bad attitude toward Christians who dated. It is our present understanding that discouraging casual dating was a preference of many of us leaders and not a command or even a principle of Scripture, although there are many principles that may be used to support the preference. We believe that individuals are free to have different preferences as to how serious they want to be before they begin dating someone. Pastors may suggest or encourage their own personal preference concerning dating, as well as their reasons for that preference, but they should be careful to clearly communicate that it is simply their preference, and that others may be equally valid.

Finally, failing to properly distinguish a command from a principle or preference resulted at times in legalism. An individual who had a conviction contrary to that of the pastors was sometimes considered rebellious, even

though that conviction was one permitted by the Word. The result was that a person might be forced to choose between violating his or her conscience or remaining "rebellious."

Steps taken to correct. Scripture instructs us in Romans 14 to express tolerance and acceptance of other believers and their convictions and preferences. For this reason, it is essential for church leaders to clearly distinguish in their public teaching and private counsel whether the point they are communicating is a scriptural command, scriptural principle, or personal preference. Failing to communicate this distinction may create an atmosphere of intolerance of alternative views and cause individuals with those views to feel restricted or judged for having that alternative point of view.

We are truly sorry for the difficulties we caused by this failure, and apologize to everyone who felt a lack of acceptance or intolerance on our part toward them. We are committed to accepting and appreciating those with different convictions, opinions, and preferences, and insuring that our teaching, counsel, and informal communication clearly and accurately differentiates between commands, principles, and preferences.

2. Authoritarian or insensitive leadership.

The problem. We acknowledge that there were instances where some of us in our immaturity tended to lead more by coercion and compulsion than by inspiration and example. Some men, especially in the early years of our movement, were appointed as pastors, or assumed the responsibility of a pastor, before they fully met the qualifications set forth in the Scriptures, and so were unable to consistently lead in a God honoring way. Others who were properly recognized as pastors acted in some cases in an authoritarian and insensitive manner. At times, we were overly directive in the personal affairs of church members and were not always sufficiently sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading in the person's life. When giving counsel, we at times advised church members to make decisions in their life based almost wholly on the goal of "reaching the world" with the Gospel. And as noted earlier, we did not always distinguish between a command and a principle and so may have treated a scriptural principle as a command. The consequence was that a person who had received counsel in some area might feel compelled to act in what he believed was obedience to a scriptural command when, in fact, the area was one where they were free to choose how a scriptural principle applied.

Steps taken to correct. It is a great responsibility to be a leader of God's people, and we take very seriously the warning that pastors will one day "give

an account" for the lives of those in their local church. We regret that some were given pastoral authority before they were qualified and apologize for instances where we acted in an authoritarian or insensitive manner. We are committed to being sensitive to the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of individuals, and sensitive to the impact that we, because of our position and influence as church leaders, can have on the lives of church members. It is our desire and prayer that individuals will develop personal convictions based on God's Word, not simply their pastor's opinion.

In order to rectify these problems, we have addressed the issue of the proper use by church leaders of their influence and authority at our annual, leader's conference, and at our regional leader's conferences as well. At these conferences, we have addressed many issues relevant to the question of a leader's authority including the importance of distinguishing between a scriptural command, principle, and preference. In addition, our pastors have, in recent years, benefitted from their efforts to interact with other evangelical churches and organizations in their area. This not only provides the pastors with new ideas and fresh perspectives on how to more effectively oversee their church, but also prevents local churches from becoming or remaining isolated from other churches in the area.

3. Direction, planning, and management.

The problem. Through the years, we have zealously pursued the Great Commission. However, our enthusiasm was not always tempered with knowledge, proper preparation, or strategic, long-term planning. A major problem was our lack of the necessary sophistication to enable us to manage a rapidly growing group of churches that were spread out across the country. Also, in the early years of our movement especially, our attitude toward church management, church growth, and the Christian life generally was, "just do it." And while we still believe there is much merit to that approach, and indeed, that it may even be a necessary approach in the early years of a new church if that church is going to be successful, we now realize that as a church grows, the leadership must begin to develop a proper balance between "planning" and "doing." Our failure at times to preface our actions with careful planning and preparation can be attributed to our youth and our desire, at times even impatience, to accomplish our goal of reaching the world. A lack of proper planning caused a number of the projects we undertook to fail, resulting in people being hurt.

Steps taken to correct. We regret that our lack of adequate planning prevented us from achieving certain ministry objectives we set, and apologize

to those whose life or ministry was adversely affected. As we grow, we are learning to recognize the importance of careful planning and the value of a certain degree of stability in our member churches. In our attempt to retain the vision, zeal, and spontaneity of our early years while at the same time managing our churches in a competent and Godly manner, we continue to seek input from books, seminars, and the counsel of other Christian leaders. We are learning much in the area of long-term planning and are striving for an orderly, Spirit-controlled growth.

4. Church discipline.

The problem. Early on, some of us had an incorrect understanding of church discipline. In some cases, this resulted in some individuals being placed under church discipline for actions that were not, according to scriptural standards, sufficient to merit it. In other cases, we demonstrated a lack of patience and too quickly administered discipline without affording the individual adequate time for private correction.

Steps taken to correct. Church discipline is the most serious action that a church can take against one of its members, and it should only be imposed for offenses mandated, and according to procedures described, in the Scriptures. The realization that our churches did, in a number of cases, improperly exercise church discipline is, therefore, a very unhappy one. We sincerely apologize to those who were treated wrongly, and express our commitment to clear up such cases, even if they occurred in the very early days of our movement. Because many of our churches were only loosely affiliated for many years, we are unaware of the exact number of times that church discipline was improperly imposed, and consequently, are unaware of the specific circumstances of each of those cases. We have made and will continue to make attempts to resolve cases of improper church discipline, and request anyone who believes that they were improperly disciplined by a Great Commission church, or who is aware of someone who was, to contact David Bovenmyer at the address noted on page 13.

To guard against future problems in this area, the Association is preparing a Book of Government that includes clear procedures that our churches must follow in exercising church discipline as well as other church judgments, including an appeal process. To insure that those procedures will be followed, the Association has developed a policy that no church discipline may be instituted without first consulting one of the Association's national leaders.

5. Lack of emphasis on formal education.

The problem. Until the mid-to-late seventies, our zeal for evangelism and tendency as young people to live in the present and be shortsighted about the future resulted in a lack of emphasis on the value of a college education. We believed that because most of the Lord's disciples were uneducated, yet effective in spreading the Gospel, that we could do the same. Many of us had a lack of appreciation for the value of a college education as a building block to a successful career and life. And because we had few "worldly" responsibilities and could afford to live on a shoestring, we didn't appreciate the value of a college degree to help meet the added financial responsibilities that marriage and a family would bring. In most cases, this lack of emphasis on education resulted in a failure by church leaders to stress to students the importance of committing their time and effort to excelling in their studies, and the resulting belief that involvement with church activities was more important than schoolwork. In some cases, students at some of our churches were encouraged to leave school so they would be more free to "serve the Lord."

Our failure to stress to college students the value of pursuing their education was also, in some cases, a failure on our part to help those students honor the parents who had sent them to college. Overall, we tried to strongly encourage students to love and respect their parents, and to view their parents as God's authorities in their lives. However, by not actively supporting the commitment the parents had made to a college education for their child, we implicitly encouraged some students to choose to leave college, contrary to the wishes of their parents. This undoubtedly caused some strife within those families and contributed to strained relationships between students and their parents. For this we apologize.

Steps taken to correct. We began to address this problem in our churches in the mid-to-late seventies, and currently there is, in our churches located in college communities, a strong emphasis on pursuing a college education and the importance of excelling in that pursuit. Indeed, our mission organization, Great Commission Ministries, requires that those who wish to minister on campus as staff members have a college degree.

Concerning a student's relationship to his or her parents, Great Commission Ministries staff persons are encouraged to help students learn to honor and respect their parents and to publicly teach the Bible's clear instruction on the subject. In addition, our staff personnel manual provides information on how student leaders can help students to love and respect their parents in

practical ways. Finally, seminars on the subject are given at staff training conferences.

We realize that a number of individuals made poor decisions concerning their education and career partially because of our encouragement or because of the examples they saw in our churches. To these people, we offer our sincere apology and regret that our mistakes contributed to career decisions that caused problems, financial or otherwise.

6. A belief that every man should become an elder.

The problem. For many years, our churches taught that every man should aspire to become a full-time pastor/elder. Our conviction was based in part on 1 Timothy 3:1 which says:

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. (NIV)

Because of this verse; because of other verses exhorting every Christian to seek the character qualities a pastor is required to have; and because of the large number of leaders that our churches would need to fulfill the Great Commission, we encouraged every man in our churches to aspire to become a pastor. In doing so, we mistakenly failed to emphasize the diversity of gifts that members of the body have been given, and frustrated many men by suggesting that unless their goal was to become a full-time pastor, they would never become fully mature.

Steps taken to correct. Our present position is that, while any man is free to aspire to become a pastor, and that it is indeed a very good thing to aspire to, he is not required to do so, nor is every man even encouraged to do so. The clear implication of the verse is that some will not choose to become pastors. We encourage men in our churches to consider whether the Lord would have them aspire to the work of a pastor and encourage them to develop the character qualities described in 1 Timothy 3. However, we no longer communicate, either expressly or implicitly, that the work of a pastor is God's desire for every man.

We regret that this incorrect teaching applied pressure on individuals to aspire to become something that God did not intend, and apologize to those who suffered because of our error.

CONCLUSION

In preparing this statement acknowledging our early errors and weaknesses we have sought input from supporters and critics outside our association of churches, as well as perspective and feedback from leaders within. We have tried to present a balanced treatment that focuses on accurately conveying our failings while, at the same time, providing context and some sense of the many good things God was accomplishing through us. No doubt, some critics will believe that we haven't gone far enough while some of our church leaders and members, especially those who are involved with local churches that have experienced few of these problems, may believe we went too far. It is not easy preparing a statement of this kind and we do not expect that it will satisfy everyone. However, we believe it to be a fairly comprehensive attempt to document problems we experienced in our formative years, and the steps we have taken to remedy those problems.

In the interests of clarity and brevity, we have just touched on a number of important and complex issues, e.g., the authority of a pastor, dating and marriage, church discipline, etc. The position papers that we are currently developing will address these issues in greater detail.

If anyone has questions or concerns about this statement, or about any of the issues addressed in it, please contact a pastor at your local Great Commission church or write to:

David Bovenmyer
3611 Eisenhower Avenue
Ames, Iowa 50010

This statement was ratified by the pastors and national leaders of the Great Commission Association of churches on July 19, 1991.



David Bovenmyer, Secretary