

The Resurrection and Post-Resurrection Narratives

Chapter 14: The Commission on the Mountain in Galilee

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Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Mt. 28:16-20).

And he said unto them, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover" (Mk. 16:15-18).

After describing the resurrection of Christ, Matthew omits a number of our Lord's appearances and ends his gospel with what has become known as "the great commission." This name is appropriate given the fact that, of all the orders that the Savior gave to His disciples during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, this commissioning is the most complete and comprehensive. In this pericope Christ will make the claim of universal authority. He will give a charge to the eleven that extends throughout the whole world and He makes a promise of His presence to give encouragement that the task will indeed be completed. In Mark's account, the charge without the claim or the promise is given with different words but with a similar meaning: "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (16:15). The exact time of this appearance is not known. A comparison of all the gospel narratives places this event at least a week after the resurrection. It occurred after the two appearances in Jerusalem and the appearance on the shore of Galilee. Many people think it occurred almost immediately before the ascension. However, the ascension occurred not in Galilee, but on the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem (Lk. 24:50-53; Ac. 1:9-12).

The importance of this commission can be ascertained not merely from the content of Jesus' message which is majestic and amazing; but also from the fact that, unlike our Lord's many surprise appearances, this meeting was by *appointment*. Matthew writes, "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee to the mountain which Jesus had appointed them" (Mt. 28:16). This appointment, at a minimum, refers to a) the Savior's prophecy in Matthew 26:32, "But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee;" b) to the announcement by the angel on the morning of the resurrection (Mt. 28:7); and, c) the words of Jesus Himself later that day to the women, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee and there they will see Me" (Mt. 28:10). It is very likely that on one of our Lord's post-resurrection appearances He gave very specific instructions as to when and where their meeting would take place. We know that Christ was specific because the definite article is used: "*the* mountain" (i.e. the one definitely appointed or assigned).

Many scholars believe that this meeting in Galilee is the same meeting mentioned by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6: “He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.” Although Matthew only mentions the eleven (28:16) because the great commission was directed primarily to them, it is likely that this was the large meeting mentioned by Paul because: a) We know from Luke 24:9-10 that other disciples, including many women, were in the room when Jesus told the apostles to go to Galilee in order to see Him. This word would have quickly spread among all the disciples. b) If our Lord wanted to communicate the great commission only to the eleven apostles in private, there would be no need for the seclusion and safety of a distant mountain in Galilee. But if Christ wanted this commission to be spoken in front of as many disciples as possible a secluded hill in Galilee would be perfect. It would be far from our Lord’s enemies in Jerusalem and it would be near the cities where most of the Redeemer’s disciples lived. (The northern side of the Sea of Galilee contained the areas where Jesus spent most of His time preaching and healing the sick). Further, it appears that there were not a lot of followers of Christ in the vicinity of Jerusalem, for on the day of Pentecost there were only 120 disciples gathered in the upper room (see Ac. 1:15). c) Moreover, given the advance notice of this meeting (Mt. 26:32; 28:7, 10) and the importance of the message, it makes sense that our Lord used this public meeting as an opportunity to appear to all the believers then alive to make them witnesses of both His resurrection and the commissioning of the apostles. d) After the triumph of the resurrection and the new radical change of the church’s mission from the nation of Israel to all the nations, a public announcement was in order. Although the great commission forms a dynamic conclusion to the whole gospel of Matthew, in a sense it is a new beginning for the church. e) In verse 17 we are told that “some doubted.” Although the disciples were slow to accept the amazing fact of our Lord’s resurrection and even “disbelieved for joy” (Lk. 24:41) at the Savior’s first appearance to the eleven; at this point in time after *three appearances* to the apostles as a group, it is not likely that the eleven were still having doubts. But if others were present who had never seen the resurrected Savior, the words “some doubted” make perfect sense. Some of the people who had been told to come to this important meeting who had never seen the resurrected Redeemer were probably thinking, “Is this really Jesus? Could He be someone else?” There were those who at first could not believe their eyes. They, however, would be soon convinced.¹

The place of this announcement, “the mountain,” conveys the biblical thought of a special place to meet with God and receive divine revelation (e.g., Ex.19:3; Mt. 5:1). The people of Israel waited at the foot of Mt. Sinai while Moses received the holy law, their marching orders for the promised land. Jesus, who was the Prophet greater than Moses, gives orders for the spiritual conquest of the whole world. Some commentators believe this mountain was Tabor, the place of transfiguration. This mountain, however, is not identified. “It has been well remarked that the very gathering on a mountain already marks an important event; for on a mountain Jesus

¹ Some scholars insist that the fact that the eleven are specified indicates that only the eleven were present. R. T. France writes, “Such a specific identification surely renders very unlikely the contention of Stonehouse... that a large group were present, a contention suggested partly by the term ‘brethren’ in v. 10, and partly by the desire not to identify the ‘doubters’ of v. 17 with some of the eleven. On the basis of this supposition it has been further suggested that this is the appearance ‘to more than five hundred at one time’ (1 Cor. 15:6). But, if this is so, Matthew was either misinformed or has gone out of his way to disguise the size of the group involved” (*Matthew*, 412). The problem with Frances’ argument is that: a) Mark 16:14 says that Jesus appeared to the eleven as they sat down to eat without mentioning anyone else, while Luke’s account makes it clear that other disciples were with them (Lk. 24:33-43). Therefore, not mentioning others does not prove others were not present. b) As noted above, it is hard to believe that some of the eleven still doubted after Jesus had already appeared to them at least 3 times.

preached his great sermon (chapters 5 to 7), on a mountain he chose the Twelve, on a mountain he showed himself in the glory of the transfiguration. On mountain heights heaven and earth, as it were, meet, and here the glorified Savior spoke of his power in heaven and on earth. With the vast sky above him and the great panorama of the earth beneath him, Jesus stands in his exaltation and his glory—a striking vision, indeed.”²

As Jesus approached this group they fell to the ground and worshipped Him. This is not the mere respect paid to an earthly king, but the acknowledgement given to the Redeemer as the God-man. They fell on their knees in adoration to give Jesus the honor He deserved not only because He was and is God in the fullest sense of that term, but also because by His suffering, death and resurrection He had conquered sin and death. “Note, All that see the Lord Jesus with an eye of faith are obliged to *worship him*.”³ “As faith is clear and vigorous, so does it see Christ to be God, and brings the soul down before him to worship.”⁴ The Jews, who were taught from birth that worshipping a creature was the greatest of sins, are here prostrating themselves in worship before the Son of God. This is an excellent proof text for the deity of Jesus.

The exception “but some doubted” (*hoi de edistasan*) as noted, does not refer to the eleven, but to others present among the five hundred disciples. The verb used, *edistasan*, comes from *dis* which means two, and thus divided in mind.⁵ The verb does not refer to unbelief [*apistein*] or even perplexity [*aporein*] but rather hesitation, indecision and perhaps uncertainty.⁶ The only other time this word is used in the New Testament is Matthew 14:31 where Peter walks on the water and becomes afraid. Then Jesus says, “O you of little faith [*oligopiste*], why do you doubt [*edistasas*]?” The people present on the mountain who doubted had faith, but they were so surprised and shocked to see the risen Savior, that there was hesitation in accepting what was before their eyes. There was a period of double-mindedness and indecision as they absorbed the amazing scene before them.

Our Lord then stepped forward, close to this assembled group, to speak. The teaching recorded by Matthew consists of three major parts: (1) the Savior’s statement regarding His universal authority (v. 18); (2) the commission which is founded upon this authority (v. 19f.); and, (3) a glorious promise regarding Christ’s presence with the church till the end of the age (20b).

Christ’s Universal Authority

Before assigning the great task of discipling the nations to the apostles and their successors, Jesus first speaks of the foundation upon which such work lies. “And Jesus came and spoke to them saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth’” (Mt. 28:18). There are a number of things to note regarding this authority.

(1) The giving of this authority is emphasized in the original language. The verb is in the emphatic position: “Given to Me was all authority.” The verb, which is passive, assumes that God the Father bestowed this authority. Our Lord then “did not assume it, or usurp it, but it was *given* him, he was legally entitled to it, and invested in it, by a grant from Him who is the

² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1168.

³ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:445.

⁴ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 413.

⁵ See Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:244.

⁶ See Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, 885.

Fountain of all being; and consequently of all power. God *set him King* (Ps. ii.6), inaugurated and enthroned him, Luke i.32.”⁷

This glorification and giving of authority was anticipated by Jesus right before His passion when He prayed His high priestly prayer. “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.... I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (Jn. 17:1, 2, 4, 5). This passage teaches us that the incarnation was a period of self-imposed weakness and humiliation; once our Lord’s suffering and death for sin was accomplished, He would be restored to the glory that He had as God the Son before the incarnation. His human nature, which had never ever been in such a state, would receive glory by virtue of the fact that the two natures were one person and because redemption was the accomplishment of the God-man, the theanthropic Mediator.

The giving of this authority by the Father to the Son is prominent in the Psalms and Prophets. David spoke of the Messiah: “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool’.... The Lord is at Your right hand, He shall judge among the nations, He shall fill the places with dead bodies” (Ps. 100:1, 5-6). “Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the King’s Son. He will judge Your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.... Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; all nations will serve Him” (Ps. 72:1, 11). “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has appointed You” (Ps. 45:6-7; cf. 22:28-29). “I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession” (Ps. 2:7-8; cf. 9-12). In Daniel 7, the resurrected Redeemer comes up to heaven and is given an eternal kingdom by “the Ancient of Days” (vs. 9-14). “Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples; nations; and languages should serve Him” (Dan. 7:14; cf. Isa. 42:1, 4).

The New Testament also teaches that God gave the resurrected Savior this universal authority. On the day of Pentecost Peter said, “This Jesus God has raised up...let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Ac. 2:32, 36). Paul said, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:8-9). The apostle taught that God “raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but the age to come” (Eph. 1:20-21; cf. Col. 3:1). The author of Hebrews said that God “appointed [Christ] heir of all things (1:2). When Jesus had “purged our sins, [He] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Heb. 1:3). Christ “has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than” even the holy angels in heaven (Heb. 1:4). “Jesus, who has made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death [was] crowned with glory and honor” (Heb. 2:9). John wrote that only the Lamb that had been slain was worthy to take the scroll out of the right hand of God and open its seals (Rev. 5:1-13).

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:445.

Scripture teaches that the triune God entered into an agreement before the foundation of the world regarding how a people would be saved from sin. God the Father sent the Son into the world to save those He had chosen. The Son came into the world, assumed a human nature and carried out the Father's will by living a sinless life and dying a sacrificial death for the elect. The Holy Spirit applies the Savior's accomplished redemption to the elect. In saving God's people, Scripture presents the Father as the originator of the plan, the Son carries out that will and then the Holy Spirit applies it. In carrying out God's plan, the Redeemer had to first suffer and experience humiliation before He could be exalted as ruler, as the universal King.

(2) Jesus was given all authority when He rose from the dead. The verb (*edothē*, an ingressive aorist) "has been given" indicates that, at a single point of time in the past, Christ received "all authority." The Scriptures identify that time as either the resurrection ("Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection of the dead" [Rom. 1:4]), or the ascension ("I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven One like the Son of Man was coming, and He came up with the Ancient of Days, and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away" [Dan. 7:13-14 NASB]). Since the ascension had not yet occurred, our Lord was obviously speaking of His resurrection. The Bible views the resurrection, ascension and enthronement of Christ organically, as different aspects of the Savior's exaltation. Therefore, one should see no conflict between these passages. The resurrection of Christ is the great turning point of our Lord's ministry and of all human history.

When we speak of Jesus receiving authority at a point in time in history it is important to recognize that He received this authority as the God-man or theanthropic Mediator. As God the Son, our Lord was equal in power and authority with God the Father. Therefore, metaphysically, the Savior could not receive any more power or authority than what He already possessed. However, in the incarnation, the Son of God voluntarily restricted the *exhibition* of His power and assumed a human nature. (The power and authority was always there. He simply restricted the public use of His power during His ministry.) Although Jesus in His human nature had a great deal of authority due to his union with the divine nature and His anointing beyond measure by the Holy Spirit,⁸ yet the judicial foundation of salvation had not yet been achieved. The

⁸ During our Lord's ministry, in His state of humiliation, He exercised great authority. Everyone immediately noticed that He taught as one who possessed real authority and not like the scribes (Mt. 7:29). He set forth teachings and imperatives based on His own authority saying repeatedly "But [or for] I say to you" (Mt. 5:20, 22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). He demonstrated throughout the nation that He had power over all kinds of diseases (Mt. 4:23; 9:35; etc) and over demons (Mt. 4:24; 8:32; 12:22; 17:18). He even cured lepers (Mt. 8:2, 3; 11:5) and raised the dead (Lk. 8:54-55; Jn. 11:1, 43; 12:1). "He gave the Twelve authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of disease and sickness (x.1); He gave similar authority to the Seventy (Lk. x.9, 17). He produced evidence to show that He had authority on earth to forgive sins (ix.6). He said that the Father had given Him authority to execute judgment; authority over all flesh to bestow eternal life; authority to lay down His own life and to take it again (Jn. v.27, xvii.2.x.18)" (Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 428-429). In the days that He walked the earth, even the winds and rain obeyed His voice (Lk. 8:25). Yet, even with all this amazing authority, our Lord had not yet conquered sin, Satan and death. The price for sin had not yet been paid. The vast earth was still under the sway of the wicked one. Further, when Jesus ministered to Israel, He had to conceal His power and glory. Those He healed were often given orders not to make public what had occurred (Mt. 8:4; 9:30). When arrested, He refused to call on the help of the angelic armies (Mt. 26:53). When He died, only a few sepulchers were opened (Mt. 27:52). But with salvation accomplished and Satan, sin and death already [definitively] defeated His authority is no longer restricted in any way. He is given the victor's crown, which is an unrestricted, universal sovereignty.

Mediator had not yet shed His blood for the sins of His people (the elect). The God-man had to live in a state of humiliation in order to obey the law of God and fulfill the covenant of works on behalf of His people. He also had to take upon Himself the guilt, penalty and curse of those He came to save. It was only after salvation had been completed, merited, or accomplished that Jesus, the God-man, could receive all authority. This authority was the judicial result of salvation achieved. Christ was given all authority because He deserved it. It was His by right. As the Mediator, our Lord secured a judicial recreation. "In the Great Commission the claim of Christ to have received from God 'all authority in heaven and on earth' formalizes *judicially* what was true metaphysically: God's rulership over all."⁹ Calvin writes, "For no ordinary authority would have been enough, but sovereign and truly divine government ought to be possessed by him who commands them to promise eternal life in his name, to reduce the whole world under his sway, and to publish a doctrine which subdues all pride, and lays prostrate the whole of the human race."¹⁰

(3) Jesus received this authority as a reward for His redemptive obedience. Our Lord had to complete His redemptive mission before He could receive His great reward. The Savior was conscious of this fact during His ministry. He said, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Lk. 2:49). "Behold I have come...to do Your will, O God" (Heb. 10:7). He said to His disciples, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (Jn. 4:34). His reward was merited by His perfect obedience unto death. Paul says, "He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name" (Phil. 2:8-9). The word translated "highly exalted" literally means "super exalted." Our Lord has gone from the very depths of the suffering of hell and alienation on the cross, to very throne of God. After voluntarily suffering a shameful and accursed death at Golgotha as a common criminal, Jesus was exalted to the *fullest* extent by His resurrection victory over death, ascension to Heaven and enthronement or investiture with all authority, majesty and glory. He was given the name Lord, which is above every name held by creatures in heaven and on earth. "We ought to put this passage alongside of Eph. i. 15-23 where the Apostle asserts that God displayed in the person of Jesus His mightiest power, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His own right hand, far above all principality and power, might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but in that which is to come. Indeed all through the New Testament the Father's agency in the exaltation of His Son is distinctly accentuated; and we are constantly reminded of the contrast between the action of men, who with wicked hands slew Him, and the action of God, who raised Him from the dead."¹¹

"The Father's act of exaltation is his reply to the Son's self-humiliation, and as such is to be understood as a response of vindication and approval."¹² The author of Hebrews focuses on the fact that the Savior's enthronement took place *after* he offered Himself on the cross as a propitiatory sacrifice unto God. He notes that "when He had Himself purged our sins, [He] sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). "The description of the Son as being now seated signifies the completion of the work of purification, conveying the notion of rest after the fulfillment of a mission. But more than that, his position 'at the right hand' of

⁹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 42.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 3:381-382.

¹¹ F. B. Meyer, *Devotional Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979), 92.

¹² Peter T. O'Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 47.

God...indicates that his is the place of highest honor, that he is not merely on a seat but on a throne, and that he is not just 'sitting' but ruling.... This is the seal of the divine acceptance of his work of purification, for he now is received back to the height from which he descended for our redemption."¹³

The sinless, obedient life of the Son of God and the shedding of His precious blood is the reason why Jesus was glorified. His redemptive work is the foundation of His mediatorial kingship. His victory on the cross is the platform for His kingdom of grace. His purification of sins is the reason He pours out His Spirit from heaven upon the church (Lk. 24:29; Jn. 16:7; Ac. 1:8; 2; Eph. 4:8). His victory on Golgotha and the resurrection is the reason why God now commands all men everywhere to repent and believe in His Son (Ac. 17:30-31). The Redeemer by His redemptive work has already won the war. He has already received the victor's crown. The great commission is simply the application, throughout history, on earth of what our Lord has definitively accomplished. "Having endured the Cross, He was fully entitled to enter 'the joy set before Him.' Having poured out His soul unto death, it was meet that the Father should 'divide him a portion with the great' (Isa. 53:12)."¹⁴

It is interesting that in the temptation narrative, near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Satan offered our Lord all the kingdoms of the world and their glory if only He would worship the devil (Mt. 4:8-9). Christ emphatically rejected this satanic shortcut to power and glory. By being obedient to God, He received not only all authority on earth but also in heaven.

(4) The authority that Jesus received is comprehensive in nature and scope. The Greek word used is not *dunamis*, which refers only to power or might, but *exousia* which means authority. Our Lord already had all the power needed to control or conquer whatever He desired; but, He did not yet have the authority to exercise that power as the Mediator. He did not yet have the authority for a spiritual or redemptive conquest of the whole earth until He first shed His blood and conquered Satan, sin and death. Once His redemptive work was complete, He could then exercise full authority over everything, everywhere. He has all authority over everything created whether physical or spiritual. Having died on the cross and been raised to life, Jesus now has the active power and full ability to rule a kingdom of grace by the power of His Spirit. He now has the authority as the theanthropic Mediator to subdue all of His enemies and the enemies of His people—the church. The will of the God-man shall be accomplished and His commands must be obeyed. The scope of Christ's authority is indicated by the phrase "in heaven and on earth." Jesus has been given universal cosmic dominion not only over the physical universe and everything in it, but also over everything spiritual: the spirits of those who have died and all the heavenly hosts (angels and demons). "Jesus Christ...has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him" (1 Pet. 3:21-22). He is the "head of every man" (1 Cor. 11:3) and the "head of all principality and power" (Col. 3:10).

Before the resurrection, Jesus, as the divine-human mediator, did not have all authority. Yes, it is true that before the resurrection when Jesus walked the earth the wind and sea obeyed His every word, demons submitted to His commands, He healed every manner of disease and He even raised the dead. But, it was only after Jesus finished His redemptive work and rose from the dead victorious that He had the right and foundation to enter the heavenly sanctuary and boldly make intercession for His people. Christ's victory over death secured victory for the elect. Jesus emerged from the tomb with the keys of death and hell. "I am the First and the Last. I am He

¹³ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 47.

¹⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John*, 3:104.

who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (Rev. 1:17-18). Jesus, by His death, crushed the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). He bound the strong man and is actively plundering his goods (Mt. 12:28-29). The author of Hebrews taught that through Christ’s death “He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

When Jesus instructed His disciples regarding His coming crucifixion He said, “Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be cast out. And I, if I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to Myself” (Jn. 12:31-32). In Revelation 20 Satan is bound so that he will no longer deceive the nations (Rev. 20:2-3). (This binding occurred at Christ’s first coming at the resurrection and *not*, as many suppose, at the second coming.) Christ’s death and victorious resurrection enabled Him to spiritually conquer all nations. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). As God, Jesus had the power to create worlds; but to conquer a world in darkness and iniquity, to ransom a people guilty of breaking God’s law, Jesus had to pay the supreme price. He had to die an atoning death. Once this was accomplished, Jesus rose from the dead with the judicial authority to recapture the whole earth. The elect of every nation will be saved. Only after the resurrection did Jesus Christ receive dominion over the whole earth which Adam had forfeited by his sin.

(5) Jesus Christ’s authority is the basis or foundation of the commands He gives to the apostles in verses 19 and 20. Before the resurrection Jesus told the disciples, “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt. 10:5-6). After the resurrection the apostles are ordered to “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19). The word *therefore* indicates that those who go and make disciples of all nations do so, on the basis of the mediatorial authority given to the Messiah. Those who go are to promote obedience to that authority. Because Jesus obeyed the Father and achieved salvation for the whole world (i.e. people of every tongue, tribe and nation). He received all authority from the Father. Because Christ has been given a comprehensive, universal authority, the apostles are commanded to go and make disciples of all the nations. Jesus, after having won the war, is given all authority. He then delegates that authority to the church. The church is to command all nations to kiss the Son, to submit to the King of kings and Lord of lords. “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet” (1 Cor 15:25).

The fact that the church’s marching orders for a spiritual world conquest are based upon Christ having all authority in heaven and on earth should give the Church great encouragement and optimism. Is there anyone or anything that has more power or authority than Jesus Christ? Christians should march off to battle knowing that Christ has secured the victory, and that His omnipotence cannot be thwarted. The pessimism and defeatism taught in so many churches today is totally unscriptural. Although there are periods in history when Christians suffered persecutions and setbacks, rest assured that the white horse Rider will conquer all His opposition. The “therefore” indicates “that what otherwise would be absolutely impossible now becomes gloriously possible, yea, an assured reality.”¹⁵

¹⁵ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1172.

Discipling the Nations

After asserting His universal authority as the resurrected King, Jesus then turns His attention to the apostles' and church's primary job throughout the rest of human history. Christ said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen" (Mt. 28:19-20).

The main verb of the great commission is *matheteuo* which does not mean teach (*didasko*) but "make disciples" (only here; Mt. 13:52; 27:57; Ac. 14:21). The translation "teach" is unfortunate and misleading. The verb comes from the noun "disciple" (*mathetes*). Jesus tells the apostles how disciples are to be made by the three participles that are dependent on the main verb. These participles receive their imperatival force from the main verb and thus are translated: "go," "baptize," and "teach." Thus, the great commission is not simply a call to evangelize or preach the gospel. These things are certainly included. But, it also includes the sacrament of baptism and teaching the whole counsel of God which implies church planting and church membership. It presupposes an authority structure and what is derogatively referred to as the institutional church. The Savior expected the New Covenant church to be aggressive and militant in the proclamation of the gospel, the planting of churches and the teaching of new converts. That is precisely what the apostles, evangelists and pastor-teachers did in that first generation of the church. In only one generation, churches were established throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace.... Their sound has gone out to all the earth, and their word to the ends of the world" (Rom. 10:15; 18; cf. 1:8; Ac. 17:6; Col. 1:5, 6, 23).

The making of disciples was something that rabbis did in the first century. They would gather around themselves pupils who would be followers of their wisdom, knowledge and ethics. The apostles and their successors were unique and different than the rabbis and the various Greek philosophers; they were to make disciples for Jesus, not for themselves. A disciple of our Lord is someone who trusts in the person and work of Christ; who has bowed the knee to the Savior as Lord; who has submitted to trinitarian baptism and has been incorporated into the visible church; and, who spends the rest of his life studying, listening and applying the Word of God to every area of life. The truth must be learned, confessed and practiced. Only those who continually abide in the Redeemer's Word are truly His disciples (Jn. 8:31).

The use of "make disciples" means that the great commission goes far beyond mere evangelism. Telling people about their sin and guilt and their need of Jesus as Savior and Lord is only the first step or beginning of discipling. The church of Christ cannot rest until people confess the Savior, repent of their sins, get baptized, join the local church, submit to godly elders, attend the means of grace and progressively grow in holiness unto the Lord. This command completely refutes two common errors in our day. One is that Jesus is merely a fire escape from hell or a ticket to the rapture; and, therefore, taking up the cross and following Christ every day is unnecessary. On the contrary, discipleship is a life-long commitment of one's life, of our whole body and soul. Another error is that people can confess the Savior and be true Christians yet not join themselves to a local Bible-believing church. This is refuted by the fact that the sacraments and teaching, which are crucial aspects of discipleship, have been delegated to ordained teaching servants or pastors. Therefore, disciples must submit themselves to church officers who in turn feed the flock. The author of Hebrews said, "Obey those who rule over you

and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Heb. 13:17). Obviously, believers are only to submit to ministers of the gospel when they teach what Christ has commanded. When the pastor of a particular church teaches things contrary to God’s Word (e.g., “Christian liberalism,” pop psychology, secular humanism, macro-evolution, feminism, antinomianism, Arminianism, the continuance of the sign gifts [the Irvingites], dispensationalism, etc), one must leave that church in order to be a faithful disciple. Are you submitting every area of your life to the resurrected King? Remember, no sphere of your life is excluded from His authority. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (Jas. 1:22).

Note that our Lord said “make disciples of all the nations.” He did not say make disciples *from among* the nations; neither did He order the apostles to simply disciple individuals. The use of the word nation is significant and brings into view a much wider goal than simply setting up a few churches in each nation. The word for nation (*ethnos*) means a multitude of individuals of the same ethnic group, language, culture or country. The ancient, biblical and modern uses of the word nation are essentially the same: large groups of people that are distinct from other groups in various ways such as language, customs, heritage, history, culture, geographical location, boundaries, etc. Paul said, “And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Ac. 17:26). John wrote, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, people, and tongues, standing before the throne and the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands (Rev. 7:9).

There are a number of things that are noteworthy about the use of the phrase “all nations.” First, the confining of the visible church and the spiritual kingdom to one tiny nation (Israel), which was characteristic of the Mosaic administration, has been abolished in the New Covenant era. Before the resurrection the Redeemer only ministered to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt. 15:24). The apostles during that period were also restricted to the same field. They were ordered not to go into the way of the Gentile or to any of the Samaritan cities (Mt.10:5). The resurrected Mediator, however, not only removes all such restrictions, but also expands the disciples’ sphere of labor to include every nation, tribe, and tongue upon the whole earth. Such a command would have been very radical and hard to accept by first century Jews. But this is precisely what our Lord had been training His apostles to do. They were to be fishers of men in the most comprehensive sense of that phrase. “The salt of the earth (v. 13) is sent forth to save mankind from corruption; the light of the world (v. 14) is sent forth to illuminate every branch of the human race. They have no longer to preach the Messiah of the Jewish people, but the Savior of the world.”¹⁶ From this point on, race, ethnicity, circumcision, background, language and so forth account for nothing. “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead” (Ac. 17:30-31).

After Jesus died on the cross He broke down the middle wall of separation, abolished the ceremonial law and thus made the Gentiles, who were regarded as strangers, to be fellow citizens with the saints (see Eph. 2:14-19). Therefore, the gospel is preached to those who were afar off (the Gentiles) and those who were near (the Jews) (cf. Eph. 2:17). The Mediator has reconciled men of all nations to God through His sacrificial blood. God has made it very clear that Jews are no longer to consider Gentiles as unclean (Ac. 10:13-16, 28). By way of application, the great

¹⁶ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 429.

commission explicitly condemns all forms of racism. The gospel is to go to all men without exception.

Second, our Lord's choice of the word "nations" rather than "individuals" or "men" is significant because it tells us that the goal of the great commission is not just that a few individuals here and there are to be discipled, but rather that eventually whole nations are to be brought under the subjection of Jesus Christ. The church's task is not completed until institutions, cultures and civil governments submit to the King of kings. This task is to be accomplished by spiritual and not physical means. Individuals and families are to be evangelized and brought into the church to learn all that Christ has commanded. All believers in turn are to apply the word of God to every area of life. As salt penetrates and preserves meat, God's word will change every aspect of society. The eventual result will be a Christian society. The idea that the Bible is a book to be used only for private, family and church devotional use; that the earth, cultures and civil governments are somehow outside the realm of Christ's comprehensive authority is a reduction of Christianity. It is totally unscriptural.

In order to properly understand the comprehensive nature of the great commission one needs to consider the relationship of the great commission to the "cultural" or "dominion mandate" given to Adam. When God created Adam and Eve in the garden, He commanded them to have dominion over the whole earth (cf. Gen. 1:26-30). God's intended purpose for man before the fall was to develop a world-wide godly culture, a culture that honored and glorified God. All of man's activities and pursuits were to be done for God and in God's way. All the accumulated labors of mankind over time: music, art, science, medicine, architecture, economics, infrastructures and so on would be done obediently and would reflect man's love of God and mankind. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works and his descendants had fulfilled the dominion mandate the result would have been a world-wide, obedient, God-loving civilization. This was God's original preceptive will for mankind. But man's sin—the eating of the forbidden fruit—necessitated the need for a Savior. God in His kindness and mercy instituted the covenant of grace. God's original plan for a godly civilization was not set aside. However, because of sin this plan could only be accomplished through Jesus Christ, the second Adam. Christ's resurrection is the new beginning, the foundation of the regeneration of the world. The total victory that Jesus accomplished on the cross is to be progressively brought to bear on all nations. "His 'all authority' over 'all the nations' demands we preach His crown rights over all men and all their institutions, cultures, societies, and nations. The saving of multitudes of individuals *must* eventually lead to cultural Christianization under Christ's rule and to His glory by His providence, in conformity with God's creational purpose. This world order was designed to have man set over it, to the glory of God. This is why at the very beginning of human history unfallen man was a cultural creature."¹⁷

Go!

After Jesus told the apostles that He had received all authority, He then ordered them to go and make disciples of all nations. Before the resurrection of Christ, people were welcomed who professed Jehovah and came to Israel, God's elect nation. But now the mediatorial King's ambassadors are to go to men everywhere. This universalism was anticipated by our Lord:

¹⁷ Kenneth Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great commission*, 42.

“Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you [the apostate nation of Israel] and given to a nation [the multinational church] bearing the fruits of it” (Mt. 21:43). “When Jesus said, ‘Go, make disciples of all nations,’ he announced in the simplest and least ostentatious way the most sublime enterprise that ever human beings have been called upon to accomplish.”¹⁸ There are a number of things that this command involves.

First, it involves a specific timetable. Before the apostles were to go, they had to wait for the glorified, ascended Christ to bestow power on the church by pouring the Holy Spirit upon it. “Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you” (Jn. 16:7). “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac. 1:8). “[T]arry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Lk. 24:29). The Holy Spirit will give them power in order to accomplish their extraordinary work which included the gift of tongues, miracles, preaching and teaching with power and the receiving of divine revelation. The apostles were not only witnesses, but were infallible witnesses of sacred history. “They were to be witnesses of all that they had seen and heard from the beginning of their intercourse with Christ (John 15, 27. Luke 24, 18) his doctrines, miracles, life, death, resurrection, and ascension.”¹⁹

Therefore, the apostles did not begin their special ministries or “go” immediately, but waited in Jerusalem, without making any attempts to preach the gospel between the ascension and Pentecost. In obedience to our Lord’s commands they were waiting for something new and extraordinary. They were waiting for the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the church. Under the Old Covenant the Holy Spirit was very active. Yet, in comparison to the outpouring at Pentecost, the Spirit’s activity could be characterized as mild showers under the old administration. But with the incarnation and the salvific victory of the Messiah *accomplished*, the Redeemer in His own Person could pour out the full stream of the Holy Spirit upon His body—the church. After the ascension, Jesus received the Holy Spirit from His Father; only then did the Redeemer empower His church. “The essential fact of Pentecost consisted in this, that on that day the Holy Spirit entered for the first time into the organic body of the Church, and individuals came to drink, not each by himself, but all together in organic union.”²⁰

The key to the success of the great commission is the power of the Holy Spirit. “Not by might nor by [physical] power, but by My Spirit says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). The conversion of Jewish proselytes from several different nations on three different continents on the day of Pentecost was a sign of the eventual victory of the gospel over all nations. The disciples did not go until they were empowered to do so.

Second, note that the apostles were to go under a specific plan. The great commission was to begin in Jerusalem, then was to go to “all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Ac. 1:8). Paul repeatedly noted that the gospel was to go to the Jews first before going to the Gentiles (Rom. 1:16; cf. Ac. 3:26). It is noteworthy that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the great commission began in Jerusalem and not in Galilee where the command was given. The reason for this was the fact that between the resurrection of Christ and the destruction of Israel there was a period where, in a sense, two covenantal administrations overlapped. The Jews who were brought up under the Mosaic administration were given one

¹⁸ John A. Broadus, *Commentary on Matthew*, 592.

¹⁹ J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1837] 1963), 13.

²⁰ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 124.

generation to repent and embrace the Redeemer. Therefore, the first preaching of the gospel began in the capital of the Jewish nation. The capital was the center of the covenant nation politically and religiously. God chose to demand repentance on the part of the religious and political leaders at the very beginning of the New Covenant era.

There are two important principles that modern churches can learn from this procedure. (1) Gospel preaching should be attended to locally before missionaries are sent off to the far reaches of the earth. If our own nation is allowed to decay spiritually and becomes militantly hostile to the Christian faith, then churches will lose their ability to go to the periphery of civilization. (2) In seeking to disciple whole nations, churches should first focus their attention on the centers of political and religious power and influence. If one wants to render a dangerous snake harmless, then one must strike the head first, not the tail. In a spiritual conquest of a nation, the heart must take first priority. Medieval missionaries often understood this principle and therefore would make great efforts at preaching to the royal court.

Third, the great commission is directed to specific people in the church. It is first given primarily to the apostles who were specifically appointed to set forth authoritative doctrine and lay the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20). Indeed, Matthew, Mark and Acts all teach that the great commission is given to the eleven apostles. "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them" (Mt. 28:16). "Afterward He appeared to the eleven.... And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature'" (Mk. 16:14-15). "The former account I made...of all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day in which He had given commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen" (Ac. 1:1-2; cf. 1:18). The apostles were the first to preach the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles and had a special role to play in the spread of the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. They set up the first churches and presided over the first church council or general assembly. Jesus even spoke of the apostle Paul as "a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel" (Ac. 9:15). The apostles were Christ's personal representatives to an unbelieving world.

The great commission also certainly extended to the unique office of evangelist, who were special assistants to the apostles, had peculiar sign gifts and in some cases (e.g., John Mark, Luke) even wrote books of the Bible. The book of Acts which describes the church living in obedience to the great commission focuses on the apostles and various evangelists (e.g., Stephen, Philip, Silas, Timothy, Barnabas and John Mark). The evangelists of the first generation of believers are not the same as modern missionary preachers in that they performed miracles to authenticate the new gospel message. Today, ministers who are missionaries depend on a completed canon of Scripture and do not perform the sign gifts, which have ceased (1 Cor. 13:8-12).

Throughout history this commission applies to ministers of the gospel who are the successors of the apostles in teaching, administering the sacraments, disciplining the flock and other public ordinances. This point is logically inferred from the fact that: the great commission is to last until the end of the age long after the apostles are deceased; the great size of the earth which at that time had unexplored continents; and, the nature of the task (preaching, administering the sacraments and discipline) which, according to other sections of Scripture, is restricted to ordained officers.

Although it is common among modern interpreters to use the great commission as a proof text for the task of personal evangelism, that is really not the intent of the passage for a number of reasons. The Bible teaches that those who preach the gospel must be officially or formally

sent out by the church (i.e. ordained and sent out by a presbytery or church court). Paul said, “How then shall they call on Him in who they have not believed? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how then shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things’” (Rom. 10:14-15). The apostle assumes that those who preach the gospel must be commissioned by God and officially appointed to such a task. Obviously, believers do not need a special commission to witness to their neighbors. But, ministers of the gospel do need to have their calling and gifts recognized by the church before they go out to preach.

In the gospels the apostles were sent out directly by Christ. After the ascension evangelists and pastor-teachers were sent out by the church. “Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen...and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia...” (Ac. 13:1-4). The Holy Spirit chose two ordained teaching elders to become missionaries; the church laid hands on them and sent them out. Obviously, not every Christian is ordained and sent out to preach the gospel.

Every example of gospel *preaching* in the book of Acts is by ordained men. The book of Acts is God’s record of how the great commission was carried out. Therefore, it is predominately a book of action. Apostolic history clearly explains how the apostles and early church understood the Savior’s orders to go. There is the example of the preaching and miracle working of the apostles Peter and Paul. As apostles these men were called, trained, set apart and sent out directly by Christ (cf., Ac. 9:5-6, 15; 1 Cor. 9:1, 17-18; 15:8-9; Gal. 1:12, 15-18). Interestingly, all the examples given in Acts of gospel preaching from people who were *not* apostles involved ordained men who were evangelists. The first example is that of Stephen (Ac. 6:8-7:53) who was first ordained as a deacon (Ac. 6:6). Stephen was a great miracle worker. He “did great wonders and signs among the people” (Ac. 6:8). This fact sets Stephen apart from most other believers. The gift of teaching and miracle working was restricted by God to only some believers (cf., 1 Co. 12:29). The next example one encounters is Philip (Ac. 8) who was first ordained as a deacon and then became an evangelist. Lenski writes, “We must combine Philip’s preaching with his power to work miracles. These gifts of God made him what has been called an evangelist, a missionary preacher. He was thus more than the ordinary Christians who spread the gospel only as a part of their general Christian calling; yet he and his work remained under the authority of the apostles and of the mother congregation in Jerusalem (v. 14) so that he acted with their approval and as their agent.”²¹

There also is the example of Silas (also called Silvanus) who accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey (cf. Ac. 15:40 ff.). Silas is identified as an elder (Ac. 15:22); an apostle or missionary (1 Th. 2:6) and a prophet (Ac. 15:32). He was actively engaged in an official teaching and preaching ministry (cf., Ac. 15:32; 1 Th. 2:2; 2 Cor. 1:19). Another “fellow worker” (Rom. 16:21) with Paul was Timothy. Timothy was a teacher (2 Tim. 2:2, 15), preacher (2 Tim. 4:2) and minister of the church (1 Tim. 4:6). He was an ordained teacher who was committed with a special trust (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). Another example is Barnabas. Barnabas was a prophet and teacher (Ac. 13:1) who was commissioned by the church for missionary work and sent out (Ac. 13:2-4). Therefore, he is referred to as an apostle or missionary (Ac. 14:14). Barnabas’ cousin John Mark (cf., Col. 4:10) was also an evangelist. He

²¹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1961 [1934]), 315.

served with Paul on his first missionary journey; with Barnabas in Cyprus; and also wrote the gospel of Mark.

If one examines the evangelists mentioned in the New Testament it appears that they were chosen from among men who were already ordained either as deacons or elders. Although there was an overlapping of function in the teaching offices (e.g., Paul refers to Timothy as an evangelist and an overseer [2 Tim. 4:5]; Peter the apostle refers to himself as a “fellow elder” [1 Pet. 5:1], etc.), Paul lists evangelist as a distinct office in Ephesians 4:11-12, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” An evangelist is someone who was sent out primarily to preach the gospel in new areas and would then (in conjunction with the apostles and other established churches) work to organize new congregations in those specific areas. Once the new congregations had the oversight of a pastor and elders (cf. Tit. 1:5), the evangelist would move on to other new territories. The evangelist was an ordained servant because his task involved far more than witnessing. It concerned teaching the whole counsel of God or all that Christ had commanded. They were involved in “equipping the saints for the work of the ministry” (Eph. 4:12).

Fourth, fulfilling the great commission involves the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s supper). The Bible teaches that only lawfully ordained ministers of the Word are to administer the sacraments. Ministers are shepherds appointed to feed the flock of God (Jer. 3:15; Eph. 4:11; Ac. 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Part of this feeding involves the administration of the Lord’s supper, which is a means of grace. This truth is supported by Ephesians 4:11-13 which names the offices given for the teaching and perfecting of the saints. “Is not the administration of the sacraments a perfecting of the saints, of the work of the ministry, of the edifying of the body of Christ?”²² Only *some* are appointed to such a task. Furthermore, only ministers of the Word are referred to as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1), “and there is nothing which more properly belongeth to the ecclesiastical stewards than the dispensation of the sacraments.”²³ Gillespie writes, “We have clear and convincing examples in the New Testament, that the sacraments were administered by public ministers, called and appointed thereunto, as baptism by John (John i. 33, ‘He hath sent me to baptize’), and frequently by the apostles, in the story of Acts. The Lord’s supper, administered by Christ himself (whose example in these things imitable we are bidden [to] follow, who also himself commanded *touto poiete; this do*); and by the Apostle Paul, Acts xx. 7, 11. So ‘the breaking of bread’ is joined with ‘the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship,’ Acts ii. 4.... So that a lawful minister may in faith administer, and the receivers receive from him in faith, the sacraments, having Scripture warrants for so doing; but there is neither any commission from Christ to such as are no church officers to administer the sacraments; nor can there any clear example be found in the New Testament, of administering either the one sacrament or the other by any person who can be proved not to have been a minister lawfully ordained. Therefore such persons cannot in faith administer, nor others in faith receive from them, either baptism or the Lord’s supper.”²⁴

²² George Gillespie, “A Treatise of Miscellany Question” in *Works* (Edmonton, AB: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 [1846, 1640]), 2:37.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:38. Those who argue that the great commission is directed to every Christian without exception do so with two basic arguments. The first is that the great commission was likely given with five hundred believers present (1 Cor. 15:6) and not simply the eleven. Regarding this argument, the fact that the five hundred may have been present does not necessarily imply that every Christian is expected to baptize, teach and administer discipline. As noted, other clear sections of Scripture limit such activities to ministers of the gospel or pastor-teachers. The five hundred

The obvious implication of this teaching is that the church must encourage men to enter the ministry, train them properly and then send them out as church planters and missionaries. The key to spreading the kingdom of God on earth is not simply to witness to our neighbors as important as that is, but is to start new churches in new areas at home and abroad. This takes a great amount of time, effort and money; but, it must be done. The great commission does not treat the church as a mass of separate individuals, but rather as an organism that works together for certain goals. The propagation of the gospel involves taking people who are alienated from God, who are serving their own lusts and place them in the body of Christ, where they are under the direct authority of the Savior's under-shepherds.

The great commission teaches us something important about the church. When churches prosper with regard to size and finances, one of their first priorities should be to use the extra funds to train men and send them out to start new churches. Churches need to be aggressive and militant in the expansion of Christianity. The biblical application of the great commission is totally contrary to the common practice in America of churches attempting to become mega-churches or little empires of their own. Their focus is not really *outward* on the spread of the gospel and the planting of new churches, but rather is on building huge facilities and programs that attract people to church for entertainment and sociological purposes. Pastors in such churches are more interested in personal fame than they are in fulfilling the great commission.

To be faithful to the great commission in our own day, churches must return to the missionary zeal of their forefathers. Ministers of the gospel must be sent out into every part of the world. Jesus must be publicly proclaimed as a light to the Gentiles, for He alone brings salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa. 49:6). To do so is to fulfill many great prophecies. "For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering: for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 1:11). "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee. For the kingdom is the LORD's: and he is the governor among the nations" (Ps. 22:27-28). "All nations whom thou hast made shall come and worship before thee, O Lord; and shall glorify thy name" (Ps. 86:9). "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth. They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the

who were present were there as witnesses and accompanied the apostles because church officers are representatives of the whole church. The members of churches are the ones who vote and choose their church leaders (i.e. those who go) and support them with their tithes, prayers and encouragement. Therefore, the ordained officers who go are ambassadors of Christ and are representatives of *the whole church*. They are *not* self-appointed or autonomous at all.

The second argument is based on Acts 8:1, 4. "At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.... Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." It is argued that the word translated preach (*evangelizomenoi*) in verse 4 does not refer to public proclamation or preaching but to personal evangelism. Regarding this argument, one should note that personal evangelism does not conflict with or contradict the interpretation of the great commission set forth above. Laymen can and should witness to their neighbors (e.g., Jn. 4:28, 29, 39; Ac. 18:26). Indeed, all Christians have a duty to be salt and light to the surrounding culture (Mt. 5:13-16). However, such personal witnessing is not the same as public preaching by an ordained minister of the gospel. God does not expect or require a Christian housewife to preach to a crowd in the public square. Further, the only example of evangelistic activity set forth by Luke in the immediate context is that of Philip an ordained evangelist who preached authoritatively. Luke uses the word *kerruso* to describe Philip's activity, which means a heralding or *public proclamation* of the gospel.

kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him” (Ps. 72:8-11).

Baptize

Those who have gone are also to baptize. They are to baptize with water in the name of the triune God. Here baptism is placed before teaching because under normal circumstances the vast majority of teaching occurs after baptism. Other portions of Scripture make it clear, in the case of adults (i.e. those who are old enough to be the objects of preaching and reasoning from the Scriptures) that a certain amount of instruction is necessary before a person can be baptized. People must first believe in Jesus Christ (Ac. 16:31), receive the Word of God (Ac. 2:41) and repent of their old beliefs and lifestyle (Ac. 2:38, 41). If they do not, they are not to be baptized. The knowledge needed by a person to be converted to Christ is not great. However, once a person professes the Redeemer and is baptized, the whole Bible is to be learned and applied to life. The pattern of the gospel preached and received, followed by baptism and then comprehensive education in the Word of God is emphasized in the book of Acts: “Then those who gladly received his word [i.e. Peter’s sermon regarding Christ] were baptized; and that day about three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine [or teaching] and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and prayers” (Ac. 2:41-42).

There are many reasons why baptism is necessary and important for discipleship. First, baptism signifies a person’s regeneration by the Holy Spirit. It is by this sovereign act of God that hearts are subdued. Jesus, by His Spirit, takes away the heart of stone that is dead and unresponsive to the truth and replaces it with new spiritual life and love. By this, the unwilling are made willing and are drawn to the pierced feet of the Savior. Christ’s conquest of the earth begins in the hearts of men. This is what separates Jesus’ kingdom and rule from all other kingdoms. Apart from this sovereign work of grace, not one person would believe in the Mediator and repent of their sins.

Second, baptism signifies a believer’s union with Christ in His death and resurrection. Baptism points to the fact that all the saving graces flow from Jesus’ atoning death. When we submit to trinitarian Christian baptism, we are acknowledging the perfection and all-sufficiency of the Savior’s expiatory, propitiatory, redemptive and reconciling sacrifice for sin. Baptism, properly understood, is a sign that we are not saved by own works, but solely by Christ. Thus, baptism signifies a believer’s complete cleansing from all sin—past, present and future. The Mediator’s blood is efficacious; it cannot fail. Thus, baptism (biblically defined) is a great act of faith.

Third, in baptism the new believer publicly acknowledges his submission to Jesus’ ownership and authority. The sincere believer who comes to be baptized has repented of his old religion, philosophy, worldview and behavior. He understands that he was bought at a price; that, therefore, he must glorify God in his mind and his actions (see 1 Cor. 6:20). He has laid down the weapons of his warfare and has submitted to the rule of the King of kings and Lord of lords. He “is proclaiming that he has broken with the world and has been brought into union with the Triune God, to whom he intends to devote his life.”²⁵ Matthew Henry writes, “Baptism is a *sacrament*, that is, it is *an oath*; *super sacramentum dicere*, is *to say upon oath*. It is an oath of *abjuration*, by which we renounce the world and the flesh, as rivals with God for the throne in

²⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1001.

our hearts; and an oath of *allegiance*, by which we resign and give up *ourselves* to God, to be *his*, our own selves, our whole selves, *body, soul and spirit*, to be governed by his will, and made happy in his favour; *we become his men*, so the form of homage in our law runs.”²⁶ By baptism we are dedicated persons unto the Mediator even unto death. Although baptism has absolutely nothing to do with our salvation before God, a person who is saved will gladly submit to baptism.

Fourth, baptism under normal circumstances is required for membership in the visible church. Discipleship must occur in the body that Jesus Himself has established for that very purpose. Those who believed the apostle’s preaching were baptized and continued under the apostle’s teaching, fellowship, the sacrament of the Lord’s supper and prayer (Ac. 2:41-42). They were added to the church (Ac. 2:41, 47) and numbered with the saints (Ac. 4:4; 6:1, 7). Discipleship must never be divorced from the church government, officers, laws and censures that Christ has instituted for His body. Therefore, it is crucial for every believer to join himself to a Bible-believing church that teaches and practices the whole counsel of God. In our day that would be the strict Reformed or Presbyterian denominations that have not backslidden and departed from the great attainments of the Protestant Reformation.

The common anti-institutional, anti-church membership spirit of many modern professing Christians in our day is not in accordance with Scripture; but, rather, is the spirit of the world disguised as piety or spirituality. It is an implicit rejection of the Savior’s authority. Although personal Bible reading, study, self-discipline and prayer are necessary for sanctification, they are only a part of a Christian’s life or duty. God is also zealous for public worship, the sacraments, godly oversight, counsel, discipline and Christian fellowship. “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Heb. 13:17).

Fifth, baptism is in (or into) the name of the triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Baptism signifies that union with Christ brings believers into a vital relationship with the three persons of the Godhead. When a person believes and is justified, he is *adopted* into God’s family. God is Father (Abba). Believers are co-heirs with Christ. The Holy Spirit dwells in believers and enables them to more and more put off sinful behavior and to put on righteousness. The church is Christ’s body, His own bride. Dickson writes, “There are three Persons in the Godhead distinct from one another in order of subsistence and operation, the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.... These three are one GOD, undivided in essence and operation, equal and one in authority and power; their name and their exercise of authority is one; for it is said, *Baptizing them*, not in the names but *in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.”²⁷

The fact that discipleship begins with baptism teaches us that the church is God’s primary institution for discipleship and spiritual growth. Christ gave the power of public teaching, baptizing, administering the Lord’s supper, governing and disciplining unto lawfully called and ordained church officers. If people are to be baptized, preached unto, taught and disciplined they must become a member of a local church. Parachurch ministries do *not* have the authority to publicly preach, baptize, administer the Lord’s supper or administer church discipline. Do parachurch organizations do many good things for people in society? Yes, they often do. However, they are *not* founded upon Scripture, but upon pragmatism. Historically, parachurch groups have weakened the church. Often short term gains are followed by long term problems (e.g., false ecumenicity, heresies, innovations in worship, a lack of respect for the

²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:447.

²⁷ David Dickson, *Matthew*, 415-416.

church and church officers, evangelistic gimmicks, pop-psychology, etc). If the church is not being faithful to her calling, then the solution is repentance and revival; not the setting up of parallel rival institutions. The responsibility to disciple the nations rests with the church and no one else.

Teach

The third thing necessary to disciple the nations is to teach them to observe all things that Christ has commanded. In the book of Revelation, Jesus is described as riding on a white horse, going forth to conquer the earth (19:11-14). How does Christ subdue the nations? Does He employ physical means such as bullets, bombs and missiles? No. “Out of His mouth goes a sharp two-edged sword, that with it He should strike the nations” (19:15). Jesus subdues the nations through the power of His Spirit and through the preaching and teaching of His Word. The sharp sword is the Word of God—the Bible (cf., Eph. 6:17; Heb. 4:12; Rev. 1:16). We disciple the nations “by teaching them the truth as it is revealed in the Scriptures, and seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to make our teaching effective in those we try to instruct in divine things.”²⁸ Everything that can be known (this side of heaven) regarding God, Christ, the law, salvation, the church, our estate and so on is revealed in the Bible. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The “all” of Jesus’ teaching includes not just everything that He taught in His public ministry, but also the whole Word of God—the Bible. Jesus taught the inspiration and authority of the Old Testament. He taught a historical, literal view of the first chapters of Genesis (e.g., Mt. 19:4-6). Christ accepted the worldwide flood account that occurred in Noah’s day (cf. Mt. 24:37-39). He also taught the abiding validity of the Old Testament moral law (Mt. 5:17-20). Our Lord told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would come and guide them into all the truth thereby guaranteeing the divine inspiration of the New Testament (Jn. 16:13).

When the church fails to teach all that Christ has commanded, the result is disaster for the church and society. The mainline Protestant denominations abandoned the word of God during the 1920s and 1930s. The effect was apostate, wicked denominations and a culture in decline. The void left by the demise of most of Protestantism has been filled by atheism, secular humanism, the occult, new age mysticism, rank hedonism and so on. With the abandonment of the Bible has come an increasing abandonment of the rule of law. Statism has followed in the wake of modernistic theology.

Fundamentalist and evangelical churches which have adopted dispensationalist doctrines have also failed to teach everything that Christ has commanded. They teach that most of the Old Testament is irrelevant to the Christian and that God has not provided blueprints for the Christian reconstruction of society. By failing to teach “the whole counsel of God,” fundamentalists unwittingly handed over our culture, institutions, courts (and so forth) to the secular humanistic modernists and atheists. By teaching a reductionist version of the great commission, evangelicals have increasingly drifted toward Christian existentialism. The goal is not the Christianization of whole nations, but the building of experiential ghettos. “Get saved and come to church each week and have a wonderful experience.” The modern evangelical church does not lead in the

²⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, 1987), 416.

areas of science and culture but rather follows. Churches are often patterned after Hollywood with crass entertainment, jokes and pop-psychology. The salvation of individuals is emphasized but the false gospel of Arminianism is preached (i.e. man has veto power and sovereignty over God). Once a person makes “a decision” for Christ, he is told not to waste his time changing society but to wait for the imminent rapture. The modern evangelical church is impotent. It has lost its saltiness.

Jesus did not teach or endorse a retreatist, pietistic form of Christianity. Christ taught a dynamic, militant, nation-changing, culture transforming doctrine. The church is to go into every nation and preach the gospel. Churches are to be established with church governors and a “whole counsel of God” preaching ministry. As more and more people in society are saved, baptized and taught, who then apply the word of God to their personal lives, family lives, business activities, civil governments, education, economics and so on, society will become transformed. The church is to keep going, baptizing and teaching until every earthly institution and every nation has submitted to Jesus Christ. A nation is not totally disciplined until it explicitly acknowledges the kingship and authority of Christ. The goal of the great commission is that each nation would explicitly acknowledge the Lordship of Christ in their constitutions, legislature and courts and that each nation would covenant with Christ.

The great commission not only condemns churches which fail to preach the “whole counsel of God” or “all that Christ has commanded,” but also implicitly rebukes all believers who add to what Christ has commanded. Churches that encourage their members to celebrate extra-biblical holy days (e.g., Christmas, Easter); or, instruct members to follow a church calendar; or tell believers to sing uninspired hymns in public worship are teaching things not commanded by Christ. Likewise, denominations which forbid the consumption of alcoholic beverages in moderation or forbid the eating of meat on certain days are adding man-made regulations to the law of Christ. The apostle Paul has warned us to avoid such legalistic nonsense. He says that man-made regulations do not contribute to our sanctification. “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations—‘Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,’ which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but, are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col 2:20-23). The great commission restricts the church’s task to teaching all that Christ has commanded—no more and no less. Thus, we are free from the doctrines and commandments of men.

Christ’s Encouragement

After Jesus commanded the apostles to disciple the nations He then gave them encouragement with this promise, “Lo I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20). The word *lo* when used in the New Testament is usually an imitation of the Hebrew style of address that has the meaning of “behold” or “see.” Jesus’ statement could be paraphrased as: “pay attention to this, I even I am with you.” Lenski writes, “The exclamation ‘lo’ is to rivet our fullest attention on the great promise with which Jesus closes. [*Ego*] is decidedly emphatic, ‘I

myself.”²⁹ Christ’s promise of His continual presence is given emphasis and therefore should not be treated as a mere afterthought on the part of our Savior.

When Israel was about to engage on their God-given mission of conquest over the pagan nations within the promised land, Joshua spoke of God’s special presence: “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh.1:9). Israel went forth to conquer the seven heathen nations with the sword. The apostles, their associates and their successors throughout history go forth to conquer by the Word and Spirit. Both are dependent upon God’s special presence for courage, success and ultimate victory. Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase” (1 Cor. 3:8).

Jesus told the apostles that His leaving the earth (at the ascension) was to their advantage (Jn. 16:7-8; Ac. 1:8). Christ’s spiritual presence (the baptism of the Holy Spirit) was more important to the task of the great commission than even His bodily presence. After Christ ascended and was seated at the right hand of Power, He poured out the Holy Spirit upon the church. This baptism empowered and emboldened the apostles and evangelists in the task of discipling the nations. The same men who fled and cowered in fear at the arrest and prosecution of Jesus are seen after Pentecost preaching with amazing boldness, courage and fervency, even under extremely dangerous circumstances. Should we not also go forth with courage and boldness? We should always keep in mind that the resurrected, all-powerful Lord of glory is our ever present companion and ally. Jesus who has “eyes like a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14) is walking in the midst of the lampstands (Rev. 2:1): “so the Lord patrols the ground, is ever on the spot when He is needed; His [spiritual] presence is not localized, but co-extensive with the Church.”³⁰ Gentry writes, “Believers are adequately empowered for the task of world evangelism and the Christian culture transforming labor that follows evangelism’s trail. The Christian has the abiding presence of the resurrected Lord of glory through the spiritual operation of the indwelling Holy Spirit, Whom Christ says grants ‘power from on high’ (Luke 24:49). The Christian should not read the newspapers and fear the encroachment of the various branches of secular humanism in history, for secular humanism in all of its manifestations is but an idol for destruction.”³¹

Jesus said, “I am with you always” or literally in Greek, “I am with you *all the days*.” Jesus is leaving not a single day without certainty of His help. Christ is not just with His people every moment of every day but also to the end of “the age.” The Lord of glory will be with the church to the end of the world. Jesus remains with the church until the task that He has commanded is completed. This proves that the great commission applies to the church until the second coming of Christ. Our Lord’s promise is not only the ultimate encouragement, but is also our guarantee of victory. Christians should never be pessimistic regarding the success of the gospel in the world.

If anyone had a reason to be pessimistic, would it have not been the first disciples? They were persecuted, stoned, tortured, imprisoned, slain by the sword, beheaded, fed to the lions, crucified, roasted alive, beaten with rods and hated by all men. A number of fathers and mothers had to watch as their children were slain knowing their demise would follow. Yet, the early church remained active, bold, and militant by preaching Christ crucified and establishing

²⁹ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg 1961 [1943]), 1180.

³⁰ Alfred Plummer, *An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982 [1915]), 436.

³¹ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission*, 96.

churches throughout the empire. They did not build tennis and basketball courts, retreat, and then wait for the rapture. Rather, they conquered the Roman empire with the sword of the Spirit. “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the LORD of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Christians are not to look to the *New York Times* or CNN for hope and encouragement, but to Christ alone. Believers who preach pessimistic defeatism for the church simply are showing a lack of faith in Christ’s emphatic promise. They are really no different than the spies who told Moses, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we.... The land through which we have gone as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great stature” (Nu. 13:31-32). Are we able to spiritually conquer the whole world? No, not in and of ourselves (Lu. 5:4-11; Jn. 15:5); but, Christ who is all powerful and who has all authority in heaven and earth is able. Jesus is at the head of His army. The church rides on white horses behind the King (Rev. 19:14).

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