



Texts in Context

Preaching Mission: Call and Promise in Matthew 28:16–20

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At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus meets the eleven remaining disciples on a mountaintop in Galilee and urges them toward further disciple-making. Matthew 28:16–20 has come to be known as the Great Commission, and it is one of the first texts that comes to the mind of many modern Christians when they consider the missionary mandate of their own religion. Both because of its post-Pentecost mission content, and because the pericope contains the only scriptural occurrence of what would become Christianity's trinitarian formula, the Roman and Revised Common Lectionaries assign the text to Trinity Sunday.

How should the Great Commission be preached in early twenty-first-century North American pulpits? Or should it be preached at all in our context? The four occurrences of the Greek word *πᾶς* (*all*) provide a simple way to list some of the text's difficulties: Jesus claims *all* authority. He commands mission to *all* nations. He wants people to be taught *all* that he has commanded. He promises his presence always (*πᾶσας τὰς ἡμέρας*; literally, "*all the days*"), to the close of the age. Does the text's call to "Go," and its reference to all nations give credence to the false notion that mission is something done only by itinerant preachers in distant lands? Is its language of commands and obedience so legalistic as to push any announcement of grace and faith to the edges of the church's proclamation? Does its description of Jesus' possessing all authority work merely to install an imperial power with

Jesus' Great Commission provides substance for many sermons (not just one) on Christian mission, and the deeper our understanding of the commission in the context of Matthew's Gospel, the richer those sermons. In all of them, done faithfully, Christ will, as he promises, be with us to shape and inspire our witness.

a different name but no different function from other emperors then or now? In our time, elements of the Great Commission telegraph most of the concerns that theologies of mission must address.

Missiologists can help here. As students of past mission efforts, they know better than the casual reader of *Hawaii* or *The Poisonwood Bible* the mix of arrogance and naiveté that characterized certain elements of Christian missionary work during colonialism. As students of Christian Scripture, they know the testimony of God’s intention for universal blessing announced from the call of Abraham forward.¹ As students of current events and contemporary cultures, they recognize that what counts as a persuasive argument changes from place to place and across time, even while the intention of God to be made known and to draw all people to Godself remains constant.

In their book, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder outline four models of mission, three that have been prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century and a fourth that they propose for our own time.² They identify these models:

1. Mission as Participation in the Mission of the Triune God (*Missio Dei*)
2. Mission as Liberating Service of the Reign of God
3. Mission as Proclamation of Jesus Christ as Universal Savior
4. Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

What follows here is a reading of the Great Commission in conversation with these four current definitions of Christian mission. I hope to show how various sermons on the text may (1) proclaim the mission of the Triune God and invite followers of Jesus into that mission, (2) call and empower the text’s hearers for life in the just and merciful reign of God, (3) neutralize other magisterial and imperial claims by proclaiming Jesus to be the only one worthy of the titles teacher and lord, and (4) inspire “bold humility”³ on the part of those involved in mission by calling to mind both the incomplete and flawed nature of the church and the constant, redeeming presence of Jesus with the church.⁴

MISSION: SHARING THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE TRIUNE GOD

In the Sermon on the Mount, as Jesus describes the ethic of the kingdom of heaven, he says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who per-

¹The Septuagint text of both Gen 18:18 and 22:18 announces God’s blessing extending through Abraham to πάντα τὰ ἔθνη (all the nations).

²Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 281–395.

³The phrase is from David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991) 489, cited in Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 348.

⁴I do not expect or advise that any one sermon should try to do all these things. My goal is to offer multiple directions for preaching, all of which spring from the text.

secute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (5:43–45).

Here we have a clue to the centerpiece of the *missio dei* school’s warrant for mission. Why should Christians be involved in mission to non-Christians? The answer is found in our “chip off the old block” status as children of God. In this model of mission, Christians reach out to others for the same reason Jesus exhorted love of enemies: so that we may be children of our Father in heaven. God is constantly moving toward humanity with the goal of a familial relationship of trust and love like that between Father, Son, and Spirit. To be children of God is to share the work of moving with God and on God’s behalf in love toward the world. To “make disciples,” then, is to proclaim God’s intended relationship with humanity and to invite others to live in that relationship.

A sermon on the Great Commission that aims to invite its hearers into the life and mission of the Triune God would point out how the words of Jesus here shape and empower a community that lives together in mutual self-giving and reaches out to others with righteousness and love. The focus on community might lead the preacher to describe the first community that heard the Great Commission. For instance, notice how odd “the eleven” sounds to our ears as a number of disciples. Why not twelve? Even to ask this question is to recognize that the community surrounding Jesus is imperfect. The Gospel that brought us the parable of the weeds and the wheat (13:24–30, 36–43) now calls to mind for us the betrayal and loss of Judas. What is more, even here, kneeling before the risen Jesus, the remaining disciples experience a mix of worship and doubt. To this raggedy group, Jesus speaks his command and promises to be with them so that, with his authority and presence, they will be able to do what he asks; they will be able to be children of their Father in heaven.

MISSION: LIVING IN THE JUST AND MERCIFUL REIGN OF GOD

Although Luke may include the most explicit statement from Jesus on his mission as liberator,⁵ Matthew also portrays Jesus as bringing life in the reign of God to light. Jesus begins his ministry with a sermon borrowed from John the Baptist, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (3:2; 4:17), and then he spends the rest of his ministry making that kingdom as real on earth as it is in heaven.⁶ He enacts the reign of God by teaching, healing, calling disciples and giving them work to do (10:1–8), preaching a text from Hosea not once but twice (9:13; 12:7), and issuing woes against those whose influence is great but whose words and actions are chronically out of sync (23:13–31).

⁵See the synagogue sermon in Luke 4. There Jesus reads Isa 61, with its proclamation of liberty to the captives and good news to the oppressed, and then says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21).

⁶Luke includes a version of the Lord’s Prayer (11:2–4), but the request that God’s will be done “on earth as it is in heaven” is only in Matthew.

When one reads the Great Commission from the perspective of what Jesus does and teaches, one sees there a call to “justice and mercy and faith” (cf. 23:23). In the context of Matthew, making disciples and “teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you” includes both passionate concern for the little ones and courage to speak truth to power.

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A sermon on the Great Commission that calls hearers to find their lives in service of the reign of God might make some of the observations about Jesus’ ministry above and then notice with hearers where Jesus is and to whom he is sending the disciples in his last speech to them. The mountain where Jesus meets the disciples is in Galilee. The setting is not the holy city, Jerusalem (as in Luke), but rather the area where Jesus’ everyday ministry happened and where the disciples’ homes and families are. It is also a place where “all nations”—that is, both Jews and Gentiles—live.

In the language of the commission itself, going, teaching, and baptizing are all participles, backup singers for the starring main verb, “to make disciples.” The point is not “to go,” as if mission could only happen in someone else’s geography, but rather “to make disciples.” The first participle and main verb could be translated, “As you go, make disciples...” or “Throw yourselves into forming disciples.”⁷ At the center of the commission is a main verb that means, in the words of Robert Smith, “to turn converts and confessors of Jesus from among Jews and Gentiles into disciples, people walking the way of righteousness, trees bearing good fruit, guests wearing a wedding garment.”⁸ Mission consists in living, for the good of the neighbor, godly lives ahead of time—that is, ahead of the end of the age—and inviting others into such a way of life. During his ministry Jesus did these things. Now, in the resurrection, he promises his presence with the disciples as he calls them to his way of life and invitation.⁹

MISSION: PROCLAIMING JESUS AS UNIVERSAL SAVIOR

To independent and individualist American ears, the word “authority” sounds dangerously close to the word “authoritarian.” Especially when Jesus says, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” and then when he

⁷Robert H. Smith, “Matthew 28:16–20, Anticlimax or Key to the Gospel?” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 32 (1993) 595. Smith explains his translation, saying, “While the participle does not indicate a separate action from the imperative, it adds urgency to the imperative, and thus the phrase may be rendered: ‘Throw yourselves into forming disciples.’”

⁸Ibid.

⁹Paul Hertig, “The Great Commission Revisited: The Role of God’s Reign in Disciple Making,” *Missiology: An International Review* 29/3 (2001) 343–354, demonstrates how important the ethics of the kingdom are to understanding what Jesus means when he speaks of making disciples.

goes on to exhort the disciples to teach obedience to “all that I have commanded,” the preacher may wonder, “How can I make *this* sound like good news?” Such legalistic language! And so much potential for Christian chauvinism! What kind of model for mission is that? Nonetheless, this text makes all-encompassing and therefore exclusive claims for Jesus. To understand exactly what claims it is making, we need to look at its context in the Gospel.

What does authority look like in Matthew’s Gospel? Before the baby Jesus is out of diapers, a tyrant has authorized his murder, and his family members have been forced to flee for their lives. Immediately after Jesus is baptized, he is tempted by the devil, who claims to have the authority to give him “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor” (4:9). What the devil wants in return is clarity about just who is higher than whom: all Jesus has to do is get low. If only he will bow down and worship the devil, everything—kingdoms, power, glory—will be his. The devil’s vision of power managed through a system of superiority and subordination contrasts sharply with Jesus’ exercise of simply empowering the disciples by sharing his authority (Matt 10) and promising his ongoing presence with them (Matt 28).

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Three scenes in addition to the temptation are particularly important for seeing how the authority of Jesus is different from that of Herod, the devil, the Pharisees, and other civic and religious leaders. Early in his ministry, in response to the compassion Jesus has for the crowds, he gives authority to disciples and sends them out. What is this authority good for? Will they levy taxes, raise armies, or settle legal disputes? No, with the authority of Jesus, the disciples will cast out unclean spirits and cure diseases (10:1): “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment” (10:8). At another point, when the disciples quiz Jesus about who is the greatest, he places a child in their midst and says, “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (18:4). Finally, in Gethsemane, as Jesus is being arrested without cause, he says to a disciple who tries to protect him with a sword, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the scriptures be fulfilled, which say it must happen in this way?” (26:52–54).

To be faithful to the spirit of Jesus’ words and actions throughout the Gospel, the sermon that preaches Christ as universal savior and inspires hearers to name Christ as Lord must point out the differences between this one and lords of every other time and place. The one who said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” also said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the king-

dom of heaven,” and “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (5:3, 5). This Jesus is Lord. No other lords need apply.¹⁰

The claim of Jesus to all authority is good news anywhere that other authorities are lording their power over God’s people, whether in the domestic, civic, or ecclesial spheres. The Great Commission proclaims that the one who lived the virtues of righteousness and mercy, and who died steadfastly refusing to return evil for evil, is both ruler (“all authority...has been given to me”) and companion (“I will be with you always”) for his followers.

MISSION: PROPHETIC DIALOGUE

Bevans and Schroeder use the category “prophetic dialogue” to suggest a synthesis of elements from the other three understandings of mission that will be helpful moving forward into the twenty-first century. With six “essential components,” consisting of eleven practices, “prophetic dialogue” is not as crisply described as the other models of mission and a bit harder to work with in the context of this article.¹¹ Here there is space to mention only a few details from the Gospel of Matthew related to this view of mission.

Dialogue implies the potential of new insights for both parties. A sermon that understands mission as prophetic dialogue might point out reasons for some humility as the disciples go forward to make more disciples. For instance, there is nothing in the stories we know of the Twelve that would lead a reader of the Gospel to believe the disciples themselves will stop learning now. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus teaches, and sometimes it even looks as if the disciples learn.¹² Surely someone who is as much of a teacher as Jesus has been to the disciples will keep teaching “to the close of the age.” Surely, also, disciples as dim as the followers of Jesus have been will, of necessity, never stop learning. Even here, at the end of the Gospel, their doubt is mentioned. As they go forward, they will be *practicing* discipleship, not perfecting and packaging it for the mass market.

The really interesting thing about this teaching and learning is that the teacher who has promised to be ever with the students may be expected to make some incognito appearances in the classroom. In Matt 25, people are genuinely surprised that their judge has been in their midst. “When was it that we saw you hungry...?” they ask (vv. 37, 44). Again, if Jesus is with us in the person of the stranger, might not that person have as much to teach us about life in the reign of God as we have to teach them?

¹⁰This is true within the church as well as beyond it. See Matt 23:8–12.

¹¹The essential components are so inclusive as to sound like nearly everything the church does: “(1) witness and proclamation, (2) liturgy, prayer and contemplation, (3) commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation, (4) the practice of interreligious dialogue, (5) efforts of inculturation, and (6) the ministry of reconciliation” (Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 351).

¹²See, for example, the exchange between Jesus and the disciples about the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:6–12).

CALL AND PROMISE IN MATTHEW 28:16–20

In the various directions for sermons here, two elements of the text surface repeatedly: the call to make disciples and the promise of the risen Lord's ongoing presence with the church. At the center of the commission is the call to "make disciples."¹³ At the center of discipleship in Matthew is the call for words and actions to be in sync, and for both to reflect righteousness and mercy. This is not to say that Matthew harbors illusions about the purity of the church or its "potential." He does not. Weeds and wheat grow together until harvest—both within individual disciples and within the community as a whole. People can say "Lord, Lord" to Jesus and yet fail to do the will of God (7:21). The need and the call for forgiveness within the community is and remains great (18:21–22). Even so, the discipleship to which followers of Jesus are called is nothing less than the fulfillment of the law (5:17; cf. the use of "perfect" in 5:48 and 19:21). The church's mission is to announce the in-breaking reign of God and to embody that reign in our common life so that the rest of the world may be able to imagine it and enter it.

The empowerment for this way of life and the element that saves this proclamation from legalism is the steadfast presence of the risen Lord with his church. As Richard Lischer says in an essay on the Sermon on the Mount, "In this New Rule we do not do the law, but what the law ordains is fulfilled *in us* (cf. Rom. 8:4)."¹⁴ Making a related point, Robert Smith comments, "Whatever arrangements concerning offices or leadership may have prevailed in his community, Matthew in the GC [Great Commission] emphasizes the authority of the resurrected Jesus, not the authorizing of the eleven."¹⁵ Before he was born, Jesus was called "God with us." In the midst of teaching his followers how to resolve conflicts with one another, Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (18:20). As he commissions the disciples for disciple-making, Jesus again promises his presence with them until the end of the age, that is, until God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. Christ's continuing presence with the church is its empowerment for mission. Of course the church must always discern how, precisely, Christ means to continue the work begun in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection, but this much is sure: by his Holy Spirit he will, as he has promised, continue to inspire and shape our witness to him and to the reign of God he has begun. ⊕

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¹³The verb, *μαθητεύω*, appears only four times in the New Testament, three of which are in Matthew. The other two Matthean occurrences refer to the scribe made a disciple for the kingdom, who brings out of his treasure things new and old (13:52), and Joseph of Arimathea, made a disciple, who asks for the body of Jesus (27:57). Once in Acts, the apostles are said to have been making disciples (14:21).

¹⁴Richard Lischer, "The Sermon on the Mount as Radical Pastoral Care," *Interpretation* 41/2 (1987) 161.

¹⁵Smith, "Matthew 28:16–20," 596.