



# The Great Commission Mandate of the Church in Matthew 28:18–20

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**T**he church is built on Jesus’s word; one such word occurs in the Gospel of Matthew 28:18–20. People understand power and authority as that which deals with tenure (connoting limit). The Christian community has an astonishing claim: Jesus Christ did not acquire his authority through election, revolution, or inheritance. His power was given to him by God, his heavenly Father, the creator of heaven and earth.

A survey of the literature on the Great Commission indicates that many scholars are unconvinced that Jesus actually gave this commission; some argue that Jesus gave no “missionary” mandate at all. Other biblical scholars see nothing illogical about the commission, arguing that Jesus wanted his followers to continue and spread that which he had begun. An important question is this: Was Christ’s mission and purpose on earth important enough to die for but not important enough to continue? This article responds to this question through a proper exegetical engagement of the text.

The Gospel was most likely written in the second half of the first century, as it presumes the Jewish destruction by Rome (Matt 22:7; 24:15).<sup>1</sup> Since Mark, which

<sup>1</sup> Keith F. Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 121.

*For Christians, the clearest call to ongoing discipleship comes at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, where the Christian community is enjoined to go and make disciples of all nations. This call is incumbent upon Christians around the world and at all times.*

is largely believed to have been written first, was likely written in the mid-fifties, Matthew was then written later—probably in the 60s or 70s CE.<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus and Origen suggest that the recipients of the Gospel were Jewish converts.<sup>3</sup> It is indeed generally accepted that the original recipients were Jewish Christians, though it is often suggested that the book must have been written in a Greek-speaking region with a large Jewish population.<sup>4</sup>

Matthew was written to show that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah; the evidence presented includes the Davidic genealogy and fulfillment of Old Testament messianic prophecies, as well as Jesus's miracles and teachings (chapters 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 23–25).<sup>5</sup> Matthew recorded selected events from the life and ministry of Jesus to explain to his audience that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament, and to present God's kingdom for the present age in light of Israel's rejection of her King. Matthew contains historical, narrative, and theological material, and is carefully structured.<sup>6</sup> Kingsbury divides the book into three major sections (1:1–4:16; 4:17–16:20; 16:21–28:20).<sup>7</sup> In view of this, the text in question, the Great Commission, falls in the third section.

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Over the centuries, emphasis on the textual analysis has largely swung to the genre of the text, along with its literary formation and context. This encounter is referred to as the “Great Commission”; it is often argued to be the climax or epilogue of the whole Gospel. Many, from the first believers on, are simply overwhelmed by the richness of this passage.<sup>8</sup> The larger context of the selected text starts from chapter 28, verse 16, which reveals intently the character, setting, and circumstance of the narrative. Jesus gave the Great Commission in Galilee, on an unnamed mountain. The disciples were prepared for Jesus to impart something vital and revelatory. Christ's appearance in Matthew 28:18–20 happened after his

<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Stein, *The Synoptic Problem: An Introduction* (Peabody, MA: Baker, 1985), 221.

<sup>3</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* ([1932] Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 1168–1170.

<sup>4</sup> Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 121.

<sup>5</sup> John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 23–29.

<sup>6</sup> Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Bibliography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 19; Benjamin Wisner Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York: Holt, 1930), 89–95.

<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Version: Matthew: Chapters 1 through 12* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 592.

resurrection. This account runs parallel to Mark 16:15–18 and Luke 24:46–49,<sup>9</sup> all of which contain four common elements: the risen Lord’s presentation of himself, the commissioning, the content of the mandate, and the confirmation.<sup>10</sup>

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE PASSAGE

The research provides the text (vv. 18–20) with a structural classification, which serves as the framework for the exegetical analysis. The three verses are systematically restructured by the research into three categories: (i) 18, (ii) 19–20a, and (iii) 20b.

#### Verse 18

καὶ προσελθὼν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐλάλησεν αὐτοῖς λέγων, Ἐδόθη μοι πᾶσα ἐξουσία ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ [τῆς] γῆς.

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

καὶ has been translated as “then” to indicate the implied sequence of events within the narrative. Ἰησοῦς—Jesus—is the subject here, the one communicating, with the disciples as recipients. ἐλάλησεν and λέγων are both used in the phrase; the former connotes “breaking of silence” while the latter, “speaking.” This implies that we have Jesus first *breaking the silence* (ελαλησεν), and then “*discoursing*” (λεγων).<sup>11</sup>

The aorist word ἐδόθη states that a fact “was given,” which refers to the human nature of Jesus alone; for according to the divine nature, all authority belonged to the Son from all eternity.<sup>12</sup> The word ἡ ἐξουσία could be translated as a state of control over something, freedom of choice, the right to act or decide, ability to do something, capability, absolute power, warrant.<sup>13</sup> It is πᾶσα ἐξουσία, meaning all authority, the full ability to do as one wills.<sup>14</sup> Two domains are mentioned, ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς, in heaven and on earth; nothing more comprehensive can be conceived than all authority in each of these.<sup>15</sup>

The statement Jesus gave the disciples here is congruent with his previous sayings in Matthew 9:6 and 11:27, since Jesus in Matthew is described as the one

<sup>9</sup> John Ylvisaker, *The Gospels: A Synoptic Presentation of the Text in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, with Explanatory Notes* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1932), 780.

<sup>10</sup> D. Wenham, “The Resurrection Narratives in Matthew’s Gospel,” in *Tyndale Bulletin* 24 (1973): 37–38.

<sup>11</sup> M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, 1888), 149.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1171.

<sup>13</sup> Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 353.

<sup>14</sup> Evert Jan Hempenius, “Matthew 28:28–20: He Has Got All Authority on Earth” (PDF), *Christian Library* (2016), 4. <https://tinyurl.com/y4fot62x>.

<sup>15</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Eisenach Gospel Selections: An Exegetical-Homiletical Treatment* (Columbus: The Lutheran Book Concern, 1928), 577.

who has authority. His authority can be seen in his teaching, his miracles, people's response to him, and his titles and unique position as a divine or messianic figure.<sup>16</sup> Morris notes that Matthew is showing the reader how the restrictions of Christ's incarnation no longer bind him and that Christ's divine authority is over the entire universe.<sup>17</sup> The term *exousia* is a more comprehensive term than *dynamis*, because the former refers to the position as well as the function.<sup>18</sup> Thus, nothing in creation is exempted from his authority; this denotes his deity.<sup>19</sup> It appears that Jesus on the Galilean mountain was first at a distance but drew closer so the disciples could see and hear him. Despite the disciples' state of mind, Jesus approaches and then restates his authority (referring to his human nature) in heaven and upon the earth.<sup>20</sup>

### Verses 19–20a

πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν·

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

πορευθέντες, a nominative plural with aorist middle participle, translated as “go,” has the sense of an imperative. In this case, the participle, as well as the verb that follows it, can be in the present tense but must be interpreted as having imperative force.<sup>21</sup> οὖν means “therefore” and has a peculiar force, which draws a conclusion from the gift of all authority bestowed upon Christ, indicating an assured reality that the work to be done is gloriously possible.<sup>22</sup> A bit of connective tissue is seen in πορευθέντες and οὖν, revealing a continuation of Jesus's words in verse 18.

μαθητεύσατε is an aorist plural active imperative participle derived from μαθητεω. The Hellenistic transformation of intransitive actives into causatives is represented in μαθητευειν: it meant first “to be a disciple or become a pupil,”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> David R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Sheffield: Almond, 1988), 115–117.

<sup>17</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 745.

<sup>18</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Resurrection Narratives: A Redactional Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 90.

<sup>19</sup> Osborne, *The Resurrection Narratives*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 197.

<sup>21</sup> William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 999; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament: With Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 642.

<sup>22</sup> Lenski, *The Eisenach Gospel Selections*, 580.

<sup>23</sup> Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 486. Joseph Henry Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1979), 386.

then became a deponent (Matt 13:52; 27:57), and from this there developed a new active “to make disciples of” (Matt 28:19; Acts 14:21).<sup>24</sup> Thus, it can be translated as “discipling” or “making disciples.” πᾶσα τὰ ἔθνη as the object of the discussion means “all the nations.” Although there have been arguments on the identity of the nations, the research agrees with Hendricksen: “the nations” here is plural and signifies the whole world (including Jews and non-Jews), yet, the divinely instituted order was to the Jews first and also to the Greeks.<sup>25</sup>

βαπτίζοντες is a nominative plural masculine present active participle, from βαπτίζω<sup>26</sup>—which means to baptize, wash with water.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Jesus instructs the disciples that in other to μαθητεύσατε, they should βαπτίζοντες. This is to be done εἰς τὸ ὄνομα—“in the name” of τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.<sup>28</sup> The research opines that εἰς τὸ ὄνομα connotes the authority behind the baptism, which is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Baptism here is seen as an activity that connotes a transfer of ownership and a promise of faithfulness.

Notable in this section is διδάσκοντες, a nominative plural masculine present active participle from διδάσκω, meaning to teach, instruct. Thayer explains it as holding discourse with others in order to instruct them, or to deliver didactic discourses.<sup>29</sup> The research opines that this reflects “to be a teacher or to discharge the office of a teacher.” Apart from baptism, the research strongly opines that teaching<sup>30</sup> is also a subordinate of “making disciples,” as revealed in Jesus’s statement.

The word αὐτοὺς succeeds διδάσκοντες and points to the fact that the third person of the discourse is the recipient of this activity, although it manifests as the responsibility of Christ’s first disciples. In the same vein, the research discovers that “Go . . . baptize . . . teach” are participles modifying the imperative verb “make disciples.” Thus, μαθητεύσατε is well expressed in βαπτίζοντες (baptizing) and διδάσκοντες (teaching). βαπτίζοντες is done once; since διδάσκοντες is not a subordinate of βαπτίζοντες, it means that it can and should continue even after baptism. The addition of τηρεῖν, which means to “keep watch over, protect, preserve someone or something, probably for a definite purpose or a suitable time,”<sup>31</sup> connotes that the disciples should emphasize to converts the keeping of those teachings. The didactic nature of Jesus’s command of teaching is not materialized if not kept and protected by converts; this command is a view of the behavior of Jewish leaders.

<sup>24</sup> F. Blass, A. Debrunner, R. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary*, 1000.

<sup>26</sup> R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission* (London: Tyndale, 1971), 94–111.

<sup>27</sup> Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 149.

<sup>28</sup> Joel B. Green and Max Turner, *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 312–331.

<sup>29</sup> Thayer, *The New Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 386.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Byrskog, *Jesus the Only Teacher: Didactic Authority and Transmission in Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism and the Matthean Community* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

<sup>31</sup> Arndt, Danker, and Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 822.

*Verse 20b*

καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος.

And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

No doubt this verse continues from where verse 20a stopped. This is the last phase of the analysis, and it ends with the proclamation of Jesus's presence: a promise that looks like a vow or a covenant. In connection with the significance of the phrase, ἰδοὺ means "surely," and ἐγὼ and εἰμι mean "I am" and "always," respectively, signifying Christ's abiding presence with the first disciples, as well as with other disciples in all ages.

More so, the word μεθ' ὑμῶν—"with you"—is a genitive masculine second declension noun which is possessive in nature. This implies a serious attachment of the person of Christ with disciples (in general). This attachment is a serious reflection of Christ anywhere the believer goes (Acts 11:16). In the same vein, the researcher observes that Christ's promise is extensive: εἰμι . . . ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος—"always . . . to the very end of the age." There is a difference in the significance of "always" and "end of the age." In view of this, the researcher asserts that the usage of these words in different ways signifies the emphasis Jesus placed on his presence—"I am not only going to be with you always, I will be with you even to the end of the world"; not "until the world ends." "I" (which signifies himself and his presence) will not leave you. In the past, some have suggested that the Great Commission was intended only for the original apostles. The analysis of the words here negates that and reveals that Christ is directing the assignment to Christians of all ages, since the apostles would not live physically and bodily upon this earth until the last day (John 21:22–23).

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Verse 20b resembles Jesus's statement in verse 18 where he restates the periscope of his ἐξουσία being the Son of Man. The observed nature is of structural and theological significance; the statements are emphatic, extensive, and enduring.

#### APPLICATION FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

In light of the preceding exegetical analysis, the researcher affirms that Matthew 28:18–20 is not only applicable to the apostles but also, in extension, to believers of all ages—which is to say, the "church," the body of Christ. As a result, the

analyzed text entails some theological significance for the contemporary church. In view of this, the article will explore the significance of the text in three different contexts.

### *Christological Significance*

- i. Jesus Christ has been given absolute authority as the Son of Man (John 17:2; Dan 7:13–14); therefore, no one is beyond his control, not even Satan. In fact, the authority and victory of the Son of Man lie in the resurrection (1 Cor 15:54–57). The contemporary church must understand that the authority of Jesus is its bedrock; all powers in the universe belong to him.
- ii. Christ's status quo informs the baptismal formula, which adds the Son—which is Jesus—to the Father and Holy Spirit. Jesus is divine, so baptism can be done in the Triune name.
- iii. The submission process to God's royal authority is humanity's obedience, as seen in Matthew 10:32. Thus, submission requires confession of Jesus Christ, the one who has absolute authority from the Father.
- iv. Jesus calls believers to make disciples (23:2–10) for him alone. The church is called by Christ to make disciples: to bring people to Christ, not for personal interest. Things that will be taught should inherently pertain to Christ in the truthful stance—the undiluted and non-interpolated teachings of Christ. Teachings that are not Christocentric will eventually produce a half-baked disciple.

### *Missiological Significance*

- v. The narrative teaches the church about its mission as commanded by Jesus Christ. It is clear that Jesus speaks to every disciple (even new converts) to key into the kingdom business (a vital responsibility) of making disciples. Thus, disciples should not remain relaxed or “arm-chaired” because of their salvation in Christ; they should have hunger to bring others into the light and knowledge of God's saving grandeur. In other words, discipleship goes beyond self-aggrandizement to preparing people for the heavenly kingdom.
- vi. In the instruction, Christ reveals the nature of the recipients. Obviously, he gives the disciples the scope of the assignment, which is “all nations.” This connotes the absence of ethnic discrimination or segregation in the course of carrying out the assignment. Therefore, Jesus in no way supports the monopolization of the disciple-making process by a particular ethnic group, or interest in just one group of people among others. On this note, the research argues that the effectiveness of the assignment lies in the fact that the gospel is preached to people (regardless of culture) without ethnic discrimination or segregation. The wording “all nations”

mentioned in Jesus's statement is significant because Jesus clearly refers to all people, including both Jews and Gentiles.

- vii. This text explains what the process of discipleship is: that which entails baptism and teaching. The two mentioned activities make the discipleship process complete. The church should note that baptism is an act of initiation and conversion, which is substantiated with the teachings of and about Jesus. Therefore, the neglect of any of the steps suggests a defect in the disciple-making process commanded by Jesus Christ.

### *Eschatological Significance*

- viii. The end of the age, as mentioned in the text, is eschatological in nature. It has to do with the truth of Jesus's second coming—*parousia*. If many Christians today have lost a sense of Jesus's presence and purpose among them, it may be because they have lost sight of the mission Jesus has given them.
- ix. Christians should not fear or be intimidated about the mandate, for Jesus has assured the church of his abiding presence. Irrespective of the hazards of the ministry, the promised ever-abiding presence of the Lord guarantees believers' safety. It should be known that death is not the ultimate of all life because the presence of Christ is to be enjoyed both here and hereafter.
- x. Even though Christ is far removed from believers (transcendent), he is also very close to us (immanent). Christians should not fear or be intimidated about the mandate, for he is with us.

### CONCLUSION

The account of Matthew 28:18–20 is significant to Jesus's mission on earth; Christ presents the mission mandate for the church with the task of thoroughly equipping all people for effective discipleship in order to advance the kingdom of God on earth, regardless of tribe, color, race, gender, or ethnic identity. The Great Commission reveals the mind of God toward the people God created, through faith in Jesus Christ as the platform for human redemption and salvation. ⊕

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