

## HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

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*A difference of opinion is emerging among evangelicals about the degree of historical accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels. A historical survey of how various individuals explain the Great Commission illustrates that difference of opinion. An examination of how the church at different periods has viewed this Commission gives perspective regarding how and when this difference developed. The early church took the words of the Commission at face value, assuming them to be spoken by Jesus. The post-Reformation church did the same until the impact of the Enlightenment, which generated the ideology of Historical Criticism. Radical Historical Criticism questions the basic historicity of the Commission, Jesus' claim of all power, His command to go to all nations and baptize, and His use of the trinitarian name in connection with baptism. Evangelical Historical Criticism questions the historicity of the same parts of the Commission, though usually not to the same degree as radical Historical Criticism. This evangelical approach to the Great Commission poses a serious dilemma for evangelical preachers and teachers in their handling of the Great Commission.*

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Since the release of *The Jesus Crisis*<sup>1</sup> in October of 1998 a number of informative developments have come. Response to the book has been overwhelmingly positive,<sup>2</sup> but a few have reacted strongly against it.<sup>3</sup> Some are yet undecided as to how to respond to it.<sup>4</sup> The differences in response have magnified a significant difference of opinion about the accuracy of the Synoptic Gospels that exists in the evangelical community at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>E.g., L. Russ Bush, Book Review of *The Jesus Crisis*, in *Faith & Mission* 16/1 (Fall 1998):120-121., and *Christian News* 37/33 (September 13, 1999):1, 26-28.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Grant Osborne, "Historical Criticism and the Evangelical," *JETS* 42/2 (June 1999):193-210.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Mike Stallard, "An Essay on Liberal Hermeneutics," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 3/10 [December 1999]:296-97

The diversity of opinion about the Gospels raises interesting questions: What difference does it make in terms of Christian ministry? Does it matter that some evangelicals understand the Gospels to be historically accurate down to the last detail, and others see the Gospels as only approximations of what Jesus said and did? Does it affect how people will preach and teach those Gospels during the next century?

A historical survey is often helpful in evaluating contemporary practices. For purposes of such a survey, the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) is a good passage to consult in comparing how various groups have handled and are handling that passage in ministry and discussion and how the advent of Historical Criticism has affected the preaching and teaching of it. The following discussion will describe the reception of the Great Commission by leaders in the early church, by scholars from the Reformation until the impact of Historical Criticism was felt, by the practitioners of radical Historical Criticism, and by those of evangelical Historical Criticism.

### THE GREAT COMMISSION IN THE EARLY CHURCH

An examination of the Great Commission in the early church is an appropriate startingpoint. A comparison of the early church's handling of the Commission lays a historical foundation for proceeding through various periods to see the similarities and differences. A century-by-century survey of the ancient church reflects how the early fathers responded to Jesus' parting commission.

#### *Second-Century Witnesses*

In his "Epistle to the Philadelphians" Ignatius wrote,

For those things which the prophets announced, saying, "Until He come for whom it is reserved, and He shall be the expectation of the Gentiles," have been fulfilled in the Gospel, [our Lord saying,] "Go ye and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."<sup>5</sup>

A later work spuriously attributed to the same writer, said,

Wherefore also *the Lord*, when he sent forth the apostles to make disciples of all nations, *commanded them* to "baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," not unto one [person] having three names, nor into three [persons] who became incarnate, but into three possessed of equal honor.<sup>6</sup>

Later in the second century Irenaeus also cited the commission:

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<sup>5</sup>*Phld.* 9 (*ANF*, 1:85).

<sup>6</sup>*Philippians* 2 (*ANF*, 1:116) [emphasis added].

That is the Spirit of whom *the Lord declares*, “For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father which speaketh in you.” And again, giving to the disciples the power of regeneration into God, *He said to them*, “Go and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>7</sup>

During the same period Tertullian in speaking of Christ reported,

Now, the Gentiles knew nothing either of Him, or of any of His promises. Therefore it was to Israel that He spake when He said, “I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Not yet had He “cast to the dogs the children’s bread”; not yet did He charge them to “go into the way of the Gentiles.” It is only at the last that *He instructs them* to “go and teach all nations, and baptize them” when they were so soon to receive “the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, who should guide them into all truth.”<sup>8</sup>

Regarding Jesus’ instructions to His disciples, Tertullian also wrote,

Accordingly, after one of these had been struck off, *He commanded the eleven others* [emphasis added], on His departure to the Father, to “go and teach *all* nations, who were to be baptized into the Father, and into the Son, and into the Holy Ghost.”<sup>9</sup>

In his remarks *Against Praxeas* Tertullian added more:

After His resurrection He promises in a pledge to His disciples that He will send them the promise of His Father; and lastly, *He commands them* to baptize into the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, not into an unipersonal God. And indeed it is not once only, but three times, that we are immersed into the Three Persons, at each several mention of Their names.”<sup>10</sup>

After speaking of Jesus’ nativity, passion, and resurrection, the same writer cites the commission again:

“For the *law* of baptizing has been *imposed*, and the formula prescribed: “Go,” He *saith*, “teach the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

### ***Third-Century Witnesses***

Origen cited the Great Commission at least once:

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<sup>7</sup>*Against Heresies* 3.17.1 (ANF, 1:444) [emphasis added].

<sup>8</sup>*The Prescription against Heretics* 8 (ANF, 3:247) [emphasis added].

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 20 (ANF, 3:252).

<sup>10</sup>*Against Praxeas* 26 (ANF, 3:623) [emphasis added].

<sup>11</sup>*On Baptism* 13 (ANF, 3:676) [emphasis in the original].

We would say in reply, that so He did; for righteousness has arisen in His days, and there is abundance of peace, which took its commencement at his birth, God preparing the nations for His teaching, that they might be under one prince, the king of the Romans, and that it might not, owing to the want of union among the nations, caused by the existence of many kingdoms, be more difficult for the apostles to Jesus to accomplish the task enjoined upon them by their Master, when *He said*, "Go and teach all nations."<sup>12</sup>

Hippolytus in combating the heretic Noetus had occasion to use the Commission:

*The Father's Word*, therefore, knowing the economy (disposition) and the will of the Father, to wit, that the Father seeks to be worshipped in none other way than this, *gave this charge* to the disciples after He rose from the dead: "Go ye and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."<sup>13</sup>

Cyprian cited the Lord's words in the Great Commission a number of times:

"*The Lord*, when, after His resurrection, He sent forth His apostles, *charges 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."<sup>14</sup>

Lest therefore we should walk in darkness, we ought to follow Christ, and to observe His precepts, because *He Himself told His apostles* in another place, as He sent them forth, "All power is given unto me in heaven and earth. Go, 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."<sup>15</sup>

For *the Lord* after His resurrection, sending His disciples, *instructed and taught them* in what manner they ought to baptize, 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."<sup>16</sup>

Likewise in the Gospel, *the Lord after His resurrection says to His disciples*: "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go 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."<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup>*Against Celsus* 2.30 (ANF, 4:566-67) [emphasis added].

<sup>13</sup>*Against the Heresy of One Noetus* 14 (ANF, 5:228) [emphasis added].

<sup>14</sup>*The Epistles of Cyprian* 24:2 (ANF, 5:302) [emphasis added].

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.18 (ANF, 5:363) [emphasis added].

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.5 (ANF, 5:380) [emphasis added].

<sup>17</sup>*The Treatises of Cyprian* 12.2.26 (ANF, 5:526) [emphasis added].

At the Seventh Council of Carthage, convened in A.D. 256 to deal with the issue of baptizing heretics, a number of bishops had occasion to cite the Great Commission. They did so with such introductory formulas as “He gave them charge, saying” (Lucius of Galbae), “God and our Lord Jesus Christ, teaching the apostles with His own mouth, has entirely completed our faith and the grace of baptism, and the rule of ecclesiastical law, saying” (Euchratius of Thence), and “the Lord by His divine precept commanded to His apostles, saying” (Vincentius of Thibaris).<sup>18</sup> When combined with the introductory words from the other fathers cited—“the Lord . . . commanded,” “the Lord declares,” “He instructs them,” “He commanded the eleven others,” “He commands them,” “He saith,” “He said,” “He gave this charge,” “The Lord . . . charges them, saying,” “He Himself told His apostles,” “The Lord . . . instructed and taught them . . . , saying,” and “the Lord . . . says to His disciples”—these formulas leave no room for doubt that the early church attributed the very words to Jesus Himself.

*Summary of the Second and Third Centuries*

The unanimity of opinion among the early fathers that Jesus spoke the words of the Great Commission is completely obvious. They took the statements of the Great Commission at face value, without ever questioning that they represented historical fact. No one issues even the slightest hint that someone else put these words into Jesus’ mouth. That He is the historical source of the Commission is unquestioned.

It remains to compare that observation with how the post-Reformation church and Historical Criticism view the Great Commission.

**THE GREAT COMMISSION FROM THE REFORMATION  
UNTIL THE IMPACT OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM**

Early church perspectives regarding the Great Commission continued without interruption for over a thousand years and into the period following the Reformation. The following comments illustrate scholarly opinion in the orthodox church during those later years.

Lange wrote,

The declaration of Christ: “All power,” etc., and His command to baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, etc., as also the fact that He received the adoring homage of His disciples, show clearly that He presented Himself, not only in the majesty of His exalted humanity, but also in the brightness of His divinity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>The Seventh Council of Carthage (*ANF*, 567, 568, 569).

<sup>19</sup>John Peter Lange, *Matthew*, in *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures, Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, trans. and ed. by Philip Schaff (reprint of an 1857 ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 560.

In connection with 28:18 Broadus states, "Jesus claims universal authority. . . . It is on the basis of this mediatorial authority, in heaven and on earth, that the Saviour issues his commission to his followers."<sup>20</sup> In connection with 28:19-20 he continues, "Jesus gives direction that all the nations shall be disciplined unto him, and taught to keep his commandments."<sup>21</sup>

Regarding the words "all nations" in 28:19, Alford notes,

It is absurd to imagine that in these words of the Lord there is implied a *rejection of the Jews*, in direct variance with his commands elsewhere. . . . With regard to the difficulty which has been raised on these words,—that if they had been thus spoken by the Lord, the Apostles would never have had any doubt about the admission of the Gentiles into the Church,—I would answer . . . 'that the Apostles *never had any doubt whatever* about admitting Gentiles,—only whether they should not be *circumcised* first.'<sup>22</sup>

Meyer also evidences his conviction that Jesus spoke the words of the Great Commission. He paraphrases "all power was given to me" in 28:18 thus: "[all power] was practically given, that is, when the Father awoke me out of death."<sup>23</sup> Commenting on the words "all nations" in 28:19, he writes, "On this occasion Jesus makes no mention of any particular *condition* on which *Gentiles* were to be admitted into the church. . . ."<sup>24</sup> He comments on "the name" in the baptismal instruction of 28:19:

Had Jesus used the words τὰ ὀνόματα (*ta onomata*, "the names") instead of τὸ ὄνομα (*to onoma*, "the name"), then, however much He may have intended the names of three distinct persons to be understood, He would still have been liable to be misapprehended, for it might have been supposed that the plural was meant to refer to the *various* names of each separate person.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Summary of Orthodox Opinions following the Reformation***

Examples from the period following the Reformation until Historical Criticism began to make its impact are plentiful and could be multiplied. The ones cited above represent a great multitude of Christian leaders from that period who show that orthodox Christianity held to the same view of the Great Commission as

<sup>20</sup>John A. Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886) 592.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup>Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4 vols. (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1898) 1:306 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>23</sup>Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, Part I, The Gospel of Matthew*, 2 vols. trans. and ed. by William P. Dickson and William Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879) 2:300.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:301 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:302 n. 1 [transliteration and translation added; emphasis in the original].

early church leaders did. An unbroken continuity of opinion prevailed in viewing the words of the Great Commission as coming from the mouth of Jesus Himself. No early Christian community or redactor could lay claim to having originated His recorded sayings. The account in the Gospel of Matthew is historically precise in its description of Christ's marching orders to the eleven disciples and to the church as a whole.

### THE GREAT COMMISSION IN RADICAL HISTORICAL CRITICISM

When the Enlightenment began to impact Gospel studies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,<sup>26</sup> however, monumental changes began occurring. Among theologically liberal scholars, questions about the historical accuracy of the Gospels started to emerge. Those questions have multiplied as the twentieth century has progressed and has now come to a close. To find that radical historical critics have questioned various aspects of historicity regarding the Great Commission is not too surprising. After all, these are scholars who, for the most part, doubt that Jesus ever rose from the dead. Their perspectives on the Great Commission pose an interesting contrast to positions taken by Christian scholars before them.

#### *General Reliability of the Account*

A. B. Bruce exemplifies extreme skepticism regarding the Commission:

This great final word of Jesus is worthy of the Speaker and of the situation. Perhaps it is not to be taken as an exact report of what Jesus said to His disciples at a certain time and place. In it the real and the ideal seem to be blended; what Jesus said there and then with what the Church of the apostolic age had gradually come to regard as the will of the Risen Lord, with growing clearness as the years advanced, with perfect clearness after Israel's crisis had come. . . . To this measure of Christian enlightenment the Apostolic Church, as represented by our evangelist, had attained when he wrote his Gospel, probably after the destruction of Jerusalem. Therein is summed up the Church's confession of faith conceived as uttered by the lips of the Risen One.<sup>27</sup>

Montefiore gives another example:

This story, the unhistorical character of which is obvious, is the *sequitur* of xxvii. 62-66. When the Christians said not only that Jesus was risen, but that his tomb was empty, the Jews retorted that, if the tomb were empty, this was due to the body having been stolen by the disciples. The Christian rejoinder is contained in Matthew's story. Both attack

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<sup>26</sup>See Thomas and Farnell, *The Jesus Crisis* 85-131.

<sup>27</sup>A. B. Bruce, "The Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5 vols. (1956 reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 1:340.

and defense are late; they arose when the situation of the tomb was already forgotten, or when no examination on the spot could be made.<sup>28</sup>

Words from the Jesus Seminar belong here:

These commissions [i.e., those in Matthew 28, Luke 24, and Acts 1] have little in common, which indicates that they have been created by the individual evangelists to express their conception of the future of the Jesus movement. As a consequence, they cannot be traced back to Jesus.

The commission in Matthew is expressed in Matthew's language and reflects the evangelist's idea of the world mission of the church. Jesus probably had no idea of launching a world mission and certainly was not an institution builder. The three parts of the commission—make disciples, baptize, and teach—constitute the program adopted by the infant movement, but do not reflect direct instructions from Jesus.

These commissions do not rest on old tradition, as their variety and divergence show. They are framed in language characteristic of the individual evangelists and express their views of how the mission of the infant church is to be understood.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, every one of Jesus' words in Matt 28:18-20 received a "black bead" vote—i.e., a rejection because of being unhistorical—in the deliberations of this group.

### ***Jesus' Claim of All Authority***

Regarding Jesus' claim of all authority in Matt 28:18, Montefiore states,

The historic Jesus would have been greatly amazed had he been told that such a comprehensive claim was to be put into his mouth. In fact the words spoken are a *résumé* of the Christian faith and of the Church's mission, as the resurrection made them. It is the glorified Christ who instructs future generations.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Jesus' Command to Take the Gospel to All Nations***

Regarding Jesus' command in v. 19 for the eleven to take the gospel to all nations, the same author comments, "The old apostles knew nothing of a command to make all the nations Christian."<sup>31</sup>

M'Neile adds his opinion in connection with this last issue:

The evangelizing of all nations was spoken of in xxxiv. 14. But the difficulty there caused by the words is greater, if possible, in the present passage. If the risen Lord

<sup>28</sup>C. G. Montefiore, *The Synoptic Gospels*, 2 vols. (New York: KTAV, 1968) 1:356.

<sup>29</sup>Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 270.

<sup>30</sup>Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels* 1:357.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

commanded it in one of His latest utterances, the action of the apostles with reference to the Gentiles (see *e.g.* Gal. ii. 9, Ac. x. xi. 1-18) is inexplicable. The admission of Gentiles to the Jewish religion is an expectation found, of course, in the O.T. But that their admission into the Jewish-Christian Church was something quite different is shewn by the glad surprise expressed that God had 'given to the Gentiles also repentance unto life' (Ac. xi. 18). Nor is there a hint in Acts or Epistles that when the first apostles confined themselves to Jews, while recognizing S. Paul as the apostle of the Gentiles, it was because of their 'reluctance to undertake spiritual responsibilities.' . . . The universality of the Christian message was soon learnt, largely by the spiritual experiences of S. Paul, which were authoritative for the Church. And once learnt, they were early assigned to a direct command of Christ. It is impossible to maintain that everything which goes to constitute even the essence of Christianity must necessarily be traceable to explicit words of Jesus.<sup>32</sup>

Another of Montefiore's views is relevant here:

There were two parties in the young church, one anxious to convert and accept the nations without any 'Jewish' observance; the other more conservative. 'By the time Matthew wrote, a new exegesis which could reconcile the parties had been evolved. It was admitted on the one hand that the Master had said, "I was not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." . . . It was conceded also by the liberal party that in His first Mission Charge He had forbidden the Twelve to go into any way of the Gentiles or any city of the Samaritans (Matt. x. 6); in return, the other side admitted that this limitation was only intended for the time during which He walked on the earth. . . .'<sup>33</sup>

### ***Jesus' Command to Baptize***

Regarding the command to baptize in v. 19, the same skepticism is evident:

Jesus had never made baptism a condition of discipleship. After his own baptism by John we hear of the rite no more. The history and origin of the conception of the Trinity lie outside the story and age of Jesus.<sup>34</sup>

It is probable, not that Mt.'s text is unsound, but that the whole clause is due to him, and that the Lord did not *at this point* command the rite of baptism.<sup>35</sup>

### ***The Trinitarian Formula***

Those of radical persuasions also question the historicity of the trinitarian formula from the lips of Jesus:

It seems plain from the early material in Acts that baptism was performed 'in the name

<sup>32</sup>Alan Hugh M'Neile, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 435.

<sup>33</sup>Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels* 358.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>M'Neile, *St. Matthew* 437.

of' and also 'into the name of' Jesus as Lord and Messiah. The mistake of so many writers on the New Testament lies in treating this saying as a liturgical formula (which it later became), and not as a description of what baptism accomplished. The evangelist, whom we must at least allow to have been familiar with the baptismal customs of the early Messianic Community, may well have added to *baptizing them* his own summary of what baptism accomplished.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Summary of Opinions from Radical Historical Criticism***

That radical Historical Criticism has reduced the historical validity of the Great Commission to nothing is quite conspicuous. That would probably exclude "teaching them all things" from the Commission too. Scholars of that persuasion stand at the opposite pole from the early church writers and from orthodox scholars through the centuries until the impact of the Enlightenment made itself felt in Gospel studies.

## **THE GREAT COMMISSION IN EVANGELICAL HISTORICAL CRITICISM**

Evangelical historical critics are next in line for a comparison of views on the Great Commission. Beginning about the middle of the twentieth century, evangelicals began jumping on the historical-critical "bandwagon." Ned Stonehouse was the first person of significance—perhaps the first of any level of importance—among the early evangelicals to break ranks with the early-church and post-Reformation orthodox view regarding the independence and the historical reliability of the Synoptic Gospels. He did this in a 1963 publication.<sup>37</sup>

Heading by heading, here is how some current evangelicals stand regarding the Great Commission.

### ***General Reliability of the Account***

In his overall perspective on the passage Hagner recounts,

At the same time, it is very clear that the words are recast in Matthew's style and vocabulary. . . . This fact, however, does not amount to a demonstration that Matthew composed the passage *ex nihilo*. . . . He may simply have worked over and re-presented a tradition available to him. . . .<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup>W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, vol. 26 of *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1971) 362-63.

<sup>37</sup>Ned B. Stonehouse, *Origins of the Synoptic Gospels, Some Basic Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963). The book was an expansion of the Peyton Lectures delivered at Fuller Theological Seminary, March 27-30, 1962.

<sup>38</sup>Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33B of *Word Biblical Commentary*, ed. By David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word, 1995) 883.

Gundry writes along the same lines:

We may legitimately assume, then, that in vv 9-10 and 16-20 Matthew edits Markan material no longer available to us and that vv 11-15 represent an inserted continuation of the story started in 27:62-66, also an insertion.<sup>39</sup>

Note the major focus of both writers on Matthew's editorial activity rather than on the historical factuality of the account. The early fathers took the account to be factual, not as an editorial "make-over" by Matthew.

### ***Jesus' Claim of All Authority***

Commenting on v. 18, Gundry writes,

The addition of *πᾶσα* [*pasa*], "all," then represents his [i.e., Matthew's] favorite diction, heightens the thought of Jesus' authority, and possibly reflects Dan 4:14 LXX. . . . Therefore it is better to say that Matthew takes "All authority has been given to me" from the tradition behind Luke 4:6b, "to you I will give all this authority," which he omitted in Matt 4:9. Its use here compensates for its omission there. Matthew inserted "in heaven and on earth" also in 6:10. The phrase adds heavenly authority to the earthly authority offered by the Devil. Matthew has a penchant for pairing heaven and earth. . . .<sup>40</sup>

Note Gundry's opinion as to the source of three aspects of Jesus' claim of all authority:

- (1) The term "all" derives from Matthew's editorial activity.
- (2) The source of the statement as a whole is the Devil's words during Jesus' temptation in the desert.
- (3) The universal scope of the claim, "in heaven and on earth," comes from Matthew's editorial "penchant for pairing heaven and earth."

In these regards, he approximates very closely the radical historical critic who wrote about Jesus' being surprised to learn that such a comprehensive claim had been put into His mouth.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Jesus' Command to Take the Gospel to All Nations***

Evangelical comments about the command to take the gospel to all nations (28:18a) follow the same path. Beare has written,

Obviously enough, if any such command had been known to the apostles, and to the early church, they would not have debated about the legitimacy of such a mission, and the

<sup>39</sup>Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 591.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 595 [transliteration added].

<sup>41</sup>Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels* 357.

'pillars' of the mother church in Jerusalem could hardly have agreed to restrict themselves to 'the circumcision' while it was left to Paul and Barnabas—two men who had not been among the eleven who received the command—to go to the Gentiles. This alone would be enough to demonstrate that this charge of the risen Jesus is a relatively late formulation. The controversy over the admission of Gentiles is long over, and indeed forgotten.<sup>42</sup>

Beare's summation closely resembles the views of M'Neile and Montefiore on the origin of the command as being the early church rather than Jesus Himself.

The same is true of Hill's perspective on the command to make disciples of all nations:

The *Sitz im Leben* of the verse probably lies in the life and work of the Church about fifty years after the death of Jesus. Had Christ given the command to 'make disciples of all nations,' the opposition in Paul's time to the admission of Gentiles to the Church would be inexplicable. It must be assumed that the Church, having learned and experienced the universality of the Christian message, assigned that knowledge to a direct command of the living Lord.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Jesus' Command to Baptize***

Evangelical Hagner shows affinity to radical Historical Criticism in his view of Jesus' command to baptize:

Matthew tells us nothing concerning his view of Christian baptism. Only Matthew records this command of Jesus, but the practice of the early church suggests its historicity (cf. Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 38; 9:18; etc.). The threefold name (at most only an incipient trinitarianism) in which the baptism was to be performed, on the other hand, seems clearly to be a liturgical expansion of the evangelist consonant with the practice of his day. . . . There is a good possibility that in its original form, as witnessed by the ante-Nicene Eusebian form, the text read "make disciples *in my name*" [i.e., with no reference to baptism]. . . . This shorter reading preserves the symmetrical rhythm of the passage, whereas the triadic formula fits awkwardly into the structure as one might expect if it were an interpolation. . . .<sup>44</sup>

The probability is that Jesus gave no such command to baptize according to this author. In that opinion he closely approximates the radical historical critics.

### ***The Trinitarian Formula***

Evangelical historical critics find their closest kinship with radical Historical Criticism in their treatments of the trinitarian formula in Matt 28:19.

<sup>42</sup>Francis W. Beare, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1981) 544-45.

<sup>43</sup>David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 362.

<sup>44</sup>Hagner, *Matthew 14-28* 887-88 [emphasis in the original].

Gundry, Blomberg, Carson, and Osborne furnish examples of this similarity. Gundry writes,

εἰς τὸ ὄνομα (*eis to onoma*) is a favorite phrase of his [Matthew's] . . . and occurs nowhere else in the synoptics. Further Mattheanisms include πατρός (*patros*) . . . , υἱοῦ (*huiou*) . . . , and ἁγίου πνεύματος (*hagiu pneumatos*). . . . Matthew edited the story of Jesus' baptism so as to emphasize the Trinity . . . ; yet only Jesus' name is associated with baptism in Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; 1 Cor 1:13, 15 (cf. Rom 6:3; 1 Cor 6:11; 10:1-4). Therefore Matthew seems to be responsible for the present formula.<sup>45</sup>

Blomberg joins his company:

On the other hand, it is not inconceivable that Matthew distilled the essence of Jesus' more detailed parting instructions for the Eleven into concise language using the terminology developed later in the early church's baptismal services. As R. E. O. White reflects: "If Jesus commanded the making of disciples and the baptizing of them "in my name," and Matt. expressed Christ's fullest meaning (for disciples "of all nations") by using the fuller descriptions current in his own day, who shall say that he seriously misrepresented our Lord's intention?"<sup>46</sup>

Carson is of the same mind:

The term 'formula' is tripping us up. There is no evidence we have Jesus' *ipsissima verba* here and still less that the church regarded Jesus' command as a baptismal *formula*, a liturgical form the ignoring of which was a breach of canon law. The problem has too often been cast in anachronistic terms. . . . [A]s late as the Didache, baptism in the name of Jesus and baptism in the name of the Trinity coexist side by side: the church was not bound by precise 'formulas' and felt no embarrassment at a multiplicity of them, precisely because Jesus' instruction, which may not have been in these precise words, was not regarded as a binding formula.<sup>47</sup>

Osborne is among this same company of evangelical historical critics when he allows that the originator of the command to baptize was Jesus Himself, but contends that the trinitarian formula contained in the command was a Matthean redaction of a monadic formula.<sup>48</sup>

### ***Summary of Opinions from Evangelical Historical Criticism***

<sup>45</sup>Gundry, *Matthew 14–28* 596 [transliterations added].

<sup>46</sup>Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 of *The New American Commentary* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1992) 432-33.

<sup>47</sup>D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in Vol. 8 of *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 598.

<sup>48</sup>Grant R. Osborne, *The Resurrection Narratives, a Redactional Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 245.

From the above citations, it is evident that certain evangelical scholars have sided with radical historical critics in raising questions about whether Jesus ever gave the Great Commission. In trying to find a middle point between the orthodox position of the early church and recent radical opinions, they have compromised the basic historical accuracy of this Commission. If they have done that, a question mark hovers over the source of the rest of the Commission.

### **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING THE GREAT COMMISSION**

If questions exist about the genuineness of four major parts of the Great Commission as well as about the Commission as a whole, can evangelical preachers have any confidence in affirming that Jesus spoke *any* of the words of the Commission? Did He claim all authority in heaven and in earth as 28:18 says He did, or was that a later addition by well-meaning followers? Did He command His disciples to take the gospel to all nations, or was that element added to the Gospel tradition fifty years after His ascension? Did He command the disciples to baptize, or was that a liturgical addition added to the account by the writer at a later time? Did He prescribe using the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in connection with baptism, or was that a Matthean redaction of what actually occurred on this occasion in Galilee?

With so much of what may be labeled as ambivalence at best and dehistoricizing at worst, how is an evangelical leader to preach and instruct his people about Jesus' final command to His disciples and His church? It is quite evident that some evangelical scholars have conceded major ground to theories of Historical Criticism. Fifty years ago, evangelical scholars stood squarely for the historical accuracy of the Gospels in general and the Great Commission in particular. Their stand matched that of the early church leaders and representative post-Reformation scholars cited early in this article. Today much equivocation prevails among them on that point.

To say that the words represent Jesus' intent even if He did not utter these specific instructions is a presumptuous copout, possibly a concession to gain respectability with the academic intelligentsia, an effort to find a middle ground between the absolute accuracy of the Gospel account and the extreme view that Jesus never said any such thing. If He never spoke the words, the Gospel writer has misrepresented a historical happening and the text is not inerrant. Further, the church from earliest times has mistakenly tied the words directly to Jesus and has obeyed the command of a clever redactor of church tradition, not of Jesus. The missions mandate is a clever ruse. The directive to carry the good news to the ends of the earth did not come from Jesus. To believe His claim to universal authority, in carrying the gospel to all nations, in baptizing, and in using the trinitarian formula therewith is a mistaken assumption. He never spoke those words. A very early Christian community and/or Matthew put the words on His lips.

The practical impact of Historical Criticism on proclaiming and obeying the

Great Commission is devastating. The evangelical church will do better if it dispenses with that ideology in studying and responding to this portion of the Gospel accounts. The same holds true for the Synoptic Gospels as a whole. Those works are historically accurate and deserve to be recognized and preached in that light.