

THE MISSIONARY’S GUIDE TO THE GREAT COMMISSION: AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

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Few would dispute the foundational nature of the Great Commission to missions and missiology. This article seeks to provide a clear exegetical analysis of the Great Commission passages in the New Testament, focusing on Matthew 28:18–20 and supplementing it with the other texts. By considering these passages, Christ’s mandate to His Church becomes clear: to make disciples in the image of Christ with the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. This underlines the primacy of the Word of God, indispensable to the missionary’s task as he fulfills the mission appointed for him by Christ.

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Introduction

Those who participate in evangelistic outreach and church work in foreign contexts generally consider their activities to be a part of fulfilling the Great Commission; otherwise they would not do them. However, examining how exactly their ministries fulfill the Great Commission requires discernment. This article aims to equip mission-minded pastors with a biblically grounded, theologically sound framework for understanding and executing the Great Commission.

The study begins with an exegetical analysis of the key passages in which the Lord Jesus Christ instructs His disciples about what activities they must carry out to participate in His work of building His church (Matt 16:18). These five passages, commonly referred to as the Great Commission passages, were given by Christ after

His resurrection: Matthew 28:18–20; Mark 16:15–20;¹ Luke 24:46–49; John 20:21–23; and Acts 1:8. This article will then synthesize the teachings of the five passages to give a composite understanding of Jesus' teaching on what the Great Commission is, so that believers who are eager to fulfill it around the world can do so faithfully and effectively.

The structure of the study will largely follow the order of phrases in the Matthean account, Matthew 28:18–20, which is perhaps the most recognized Great Commission passage:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to keep all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."²

In Matthew's Great Commission several major themes related to global missions coalesce, including the propagation of God's Kingdom, discipleship within the context of the local church, the authority of the Risen Christ, and His enabling presence among His disciples.³

The other four passages are as follows:

Mark 16:15–20: [And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; and they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly *poison*, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." So then, the Lord Jesus, after He had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed.]

¹ The purpose here is not to assert the originality of Mark 16:9–20, though the discussion has an important place in textual and missiological scholarship. Against the inclusion of the longer ending of Mark 16:9–20, since it is "missing from the most reliable ancient manuscripts," along with counsel for pastoral application, see John MacArthur, *Mark 9–16*, MNTC (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2015), 408–18; and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 685–88. In support of the canonicity of the longer ending of Mark 16:9–20 is the view that since most manuscripts have the long ending of Mark, it was most likely part of the original autograph. For the view, see Maurice A. Robinson and William G. Pierpont, *The Case for the Byzantine Priority* (Malta: Infinity, 2005), 13–46; Wilbur N. Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament Text IV* (Bengaluru, Karnataka, India: WNP, 2014), 89–128.

² Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations come from the *Legacy Standard Bible* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2021).

³ So recognized in Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, NAC 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 429, and Donald Alfred Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B (Dallas, TX: Word, 1995), 881, but with caution in D. A. Carson, "Matthew," in *Matthew–Mark*, EBC 9, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 662, and R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1109.

Luke 24:46–49, including here v. 45: Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of My Father upon you, but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

John 20:21–23: So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.”

Acts 1:8 (including here v. 7): But He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has set by His own authority; but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth.”

In analyzing Jesus’ commands in the Great Commission passages, two fundamental observations emerge that put Scripture at the center of His mission to the nations. First, the risen Christ proclaims a global mandate for missions by His divine authority, supplying spiritual power to those who go and preach and teach the exclusive gospel of God as recorded in the Bible. Second, the risen Christ tasks those He sends with making disciples on the basis of the biblical content, by sending them to the nations to baptize believers and teach theology and practice.

The Risen Christ Ushers a Global Mandate on His Divine Authority

Matthew’s Great Commission passage elucidates how the Lord Jesus Christ has authorized His disciples to make new disciples: by proclaiming the content of the Scriptures and demanding adherence to its teaching. Because Christ is King, His Word is the ultimate authority for belief and conduct everywhere.⁴

Scripture’s Authority as the Foundation for the Great Commission

To understand how Christ’s authority operates in the Great Commission, a few brief statements on the inspiration, inerrancy, and sufficiency of Scripture are necessary to establish its universal authority. First, the didactic nature of the Great

⁴ The doctrine of the authority of Scripture is directly asserted by Jesus, in John 10:35 (“the Scripture cannot be broken”), and Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:1–2 (disciples receive Jesus’ commands through the apostles). Additionally, the Reformed doctrine of the “witness of the Spirit” affirms the biblical evidence that when the Holy Spirit regenerates the soul, the reader of Scripture confidently recognizes the authority of the text and welcomes it as divine in origin (1 Thess 1:5; 2:13). See John Calvin, *Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1.7.5.

Commission task stems from the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration.⁵ God is the source of every revealed text of Scripture (πᾶσα γραφή, 2 Tim 3:16),⁶ having “breathed out” eternal words (θεόπνευστος, 2 Tim 3:16).⁷ Through the supernatural superintendence of the Holy Spirit (2 Pet 1:21), God taught His eternal words to the prophets and the apostles (1 Cor 2:13; cf. John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13).⁸ By transmitting His teaching through the biblical writers, the Ultimate Author of the text continues to instruct those who read His words (1 Thess 2:13).

Second, for Scripture to command adherence, it must be perfectly truthful. God, who cannot deviate from the truth,⁹ ensured that His written revelation expresses only what is wholly accurate to reality (2 Sam 7:28; Ps 119:160; John 17:17).¹⁰

⁵ For the doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration, see Louis Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 148–50; Archibald A. Hodge, and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (1881; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 17–29; John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 77–81.

⁶ The two words, πᾶσα γραφή, agree in gender and number, indicating the sense of “every” word of Scripture, from the word level to the sentence level. For support of γραφή as “Scripture,” see references to OT propositions in Matthew 21:42; 22:29; 26:54, 56; Mark 12:10, 24; 14:49; Luke 4:21; John 5:39; 7:38; 10:34–35; 13:18; 17:12; and NT propositions in Luke 10:7 (cf. Deut 25:4); 2 Peter 3:15–16 (vis Paul’s writings); 1 Corinthians 14:37. So concluded by Wayne A. Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation,” in *Scripture and Truth*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 39: “The Old Testament writings are regarded as God’s words in written form.”

⁷ The Pauline hapax legomenon θεόπνευστος is a verbal noun with a passive sense that likely functions as a predicate adjective to specify the Divine origin of the biblical text. William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 449 (hereafter BDAG). See discussion of the term by Benjamin B. Warfield, “God-Inspired Scripture,” in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 296: “The Scriptures owe their origin to an activity of God the Holy Ghost and are in the highest and truest sense His creation.” There are many direct and indirect assertions of the divine origin of the written Word. Some of the direct assertions include Exod 17:14; 34:27; Deut 31:19, 24; Pss 140, 142; Isa 8:1; 30:8; Jer 36:1–3; 28; Hab 2:2; 1 Cor 7:10; 14:37; 11:23; 1 Thess 4:15; cf. 1 Cor 7:25, 40; Rev 1:19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5. Cf. 10:4. Some of the indirect assertions include Lev 1:1; Num 1:1; “thus says Yahweh” statements, e.g., Isa 1:2; 8:1; 42:5; Jer 1:11; Ezek 1:3; 33:1, 23; 34:1; Ezra 1:1; Neh 9:30; Zech 7:12; Mark 9:12; 14:21; Luke 18:31; John 7:38, 42; Rom 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; Gal 4:30; 1 Tim 5:18.

⁸ For assertions that the words of the biblical writers are exactly the Word of God, see the following passages: regarding Moses, Mark 7:9, 10, 13; Neh 8:1, 3, 14; 13:1; cf. 9:3; regarding the Psalms, see John 10:34–35; regarding Jeremiah, see Dan 9:1–2; regarding the prophets, see Zech 7:12; Matt 2:15; regarding David, see Acts 1:16; of Paul himself, see 1 Thess 2:13. While the delivery of special revelation is mysterious (see discussion in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:9–19), the biblical writers recognized the objective, transcendent character of their words when writing Scripture. For discussion, see Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation,” 19–59; Kenneth Kantzer, “The Christ-Revelation as Act and Interpretation,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Savior and Lord*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 256, cited with comments in Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, Volume III: God Who Speaks and Shows: Fifteen Theses, Part Two* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 463.

⁹ On God’s truthfulness, see Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; John 14:6; 17:3; Rom 3:4; Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18; 1 John 5:20.

¹⁰ See Roger R. Nicole, “Appendix 5: Charles Hodge’s View of Inerrancy,” in Archibald A. Hodge, and Benjamin B. Warfield, *Inspiration*, 93–95 (1881; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 93–95; Paul D. Feinberg, “The Meaning of Inerrancy,” 294, with discussion from 267–304; ICBI Chicago Statement on Inerrancy; MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 81, 107–113. Scripture asserts the absolute, truthful character of its morphemes and syntax and affirms that the data in the text is described accurately to the truth. Grudem, “Scripture’s Self-Attestation,” 51–52. Against the theory that the writers

Understanding what is expressed depends on how it is expressed, and so the very form of the words is essential for representing every matter faithfully.¹¹ In this way, God's Word provides the reader with access to the knowledge that is essential for living with an accurate understanding of the spiritual and physical reality around him.

Third, making disciples who live according to the Scriptures is not only possible but expected because God has sufficiently revealed the complete set of spiritual and material information about His nature, His will, man, and the created order.¹² God, through His Word, commands what people are and are not to believe objectively and how they are to conduct their lives.¹³ Because of its inherent authority, the revealed Word of God is no "personal" or "dialectical revelation" that is subject to selective interpretation and application, but an objective theological corpus with life and death consequences.¹⁴ Thus, the relevance of Scripture to an audience does not depend upon how its theological content might correspond to local beliefs and traditions, nor whether the truths proclaimed can be empirically tested. These foundational doctrines of biblical authority provide the framework for understanding that in the Great Commission Christ supplies His supreme authority to His witnesses, so that as they proclaim His exclusive gospel, sinners will come under His authority in obedience to the truth.

Christ Supplies His Supreme Authority to His Disciples

In Matthew 28:18 Jesus declares that His authority (ἐξουσία) is comprehensive and absolute—His sovereign control is adjectivally described as over "all" (πᾶσα) realms.¹⁵ The risen Christ's authority over the Great Commission is delegated from

of Scripture deliberately accommodated certain statements to the worldview and cultures of their readers, see Grudem, "Scripture's Self-Attestation," 53–57.

¹¹ Scripture is inerrant in every word of the original autographs, which includes the syntax of the words. Support comes from 1 Cor 2:13, in which Paul's use of συγκρίνοντες with πνευματικοῖς and πνευματικῶς implies that the Spirit's work included matching spiritual truths with their verbal arrangement. Also, in Gal 3:16, Paul's Christological "seed" (σπέρμα) argument hinges on the grammatical number expressed by God in the Abraham narratives, in which "seed" (σπῆ) is expressed in the singular form (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 17:7; 22:18; 24:7).

¹² Primary support for the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture includes Deut 29:29; John 20:30–31; 2 Pet 1:3–4 (cf. Dan 8:26; 12:4; Rev 10:4); cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32; Rev 22:18–19. Biblical descriptions of Scripture's sufficiency are presented in Ps 119:105; 2 Tim 3:14–15; Titus 1:9; 2 Pet 1:19–20.

¹³ Scripture's sufficiency is related to its inspiration in 2 Tim 3:16–17 and Ps 19:7–11, each passage listing the daily benefits of God's Word to the life of the faith-filled reader.

¹⁴ Carl Henry used the holistic expression "propositional revelation" (Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:482) to answer the charge of subjectivity and relativity of meaning and application, that "the value of theological propositions lies only in their validity for life style or in their moral consequences." Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:456. For discussion of views against the term "propositional revelation," see Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:455–81. For a recent proposal of Scripture as dialectical rather than propositional, see James Arcadi, "Analytic Theology as Declarative Theology," *TheoLogica* (2017): 37–52. Note that Arcadi's use of the term "declarative" does not mean "proclamational" but instead refers to "dialectical," "personal," and "subjective" interpretations of Scripture, which leads to a "culturally bound" theological method and expression that might not seek to represent the original meaning of the texts in question.

¹⁵ "ἐξουσία," BDAG, 352–53; "πᾶς," BDAG, 782; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 745; John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NIGTC (Grand

His Father and is operative in the supreme sense because, as the eternal Son, He is of equal divine essence to the Father (John 1:1; 10:30; 12:41; 17:5, 10, 21–24).¹⁶ Because Jesus is God, His authority is limitlessly transdimensional, being “in heaven and on earth” (ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, Matt 28:18).¹⁷

Specific to His rulership over the earth, the Son holds authority as the Father's representative King, the messianic role which was anticipated in His genealogy. Matthew introduces the Messiah as being in the line of David and Abraham (Matt 1:1), through whom all the nations will be blessed (cf. Gen 12:1–3).¹⁸ Messiah's mission, which is universal in scope according to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:3), is undergirded by His supreme authority as the ultimate Davidic King, who will rule the world forever (2 Sam 7:12, 16). Such comprehensive and absolute authority is inherent to the God-Man Jesus Christ. Christ alone governs the boundaries and outcomes of global missions.

Of further emphasis, the term “all” in verse Matthew 28:18 is couched in the immediate context of Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to His disciples in verses 16–17. The context reinforces the reality that because Jesus has resurrected to an eternally glorified life, His commanding role will continue into the future without end. It is with this unlimited authority that Christ mandates the mission of His followers (28:19),¹⁹ granting them to wield His unassailable authority as they preach and teach His Word.²⁰ According to the subsequent Great Commission statement in Acts 1:8, because the Son's reign is universal, His followers now take up His preaching and teaching ministry with His power beyond Judea and Samaria. He sends them beyond the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5–6; cf. 15:24),²¹ to the “ends of the earth,” which is as far as His followers can go.

Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 1264, connects the context and use of the adjective to Matthew 11:27—Πάντα μοι παρεδόθη ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς μου. All Greek text is from Nestle, Eberhard, and Institute for New Testament Textual Research, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012).

¹⁶ The passive construction ἐδόθη μοι distinguishes the delegation of authority (from the Father to the Son) without compromising the divine equality of the Persons of the Godhead—the Son's authority, though delegated from the Father, is the most supreme power, and exactly that which befits the Mediatorial King, who is both God and man. So recognized in Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431, and Carson, “Matthew,” 665. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886, connects the Risen Son's authority to His delegated authority pre-Cross, which was essential in testifying that the Son is equal to God (cf. Matt 9:6, 8; 11:27; John 3:35–36).

¹⁷ The phrase occurs four times in Matthew, though in varied forms in relation to the article or the noun number (6:10; 16:19; 18:18; 28:18). Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1265.

¹⁸ The Great Commission of Matthew 28 is a thematic *inclusio* to the opening verse of the genealogy, insofar as David's Messiah “makes possible the fulfillment of the universal intention that the good news is brought to the nations.” In Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 36. Also see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2 vols. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 1:365.

¹⁹ So noted in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:371; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431; David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 689.

²⁰ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1083–84; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 889.

²¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1079. Global evangelism was always Christ's plan, but Israel was to receive news that Messiah had arrived first, as demonstrated in the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1–10) and in the practices of the Apostle Paul, who, although being the “apostle to the Gentiles” (Rom 11:13; cf. Acts 26:16–18), typically began his proclamation ministry in Jewish synagogues (Acts 9:20; 13:5; 18:4).

Christ Empowers an Exclusive Mission

Having established Christ's supreme authority, the Great Commission demonstrates that preaching and teaching can only be accomplished by Christ's inexhaustible power. He promises to be present with His disciples so that they will persevere by His power in His exclusive mission. The following sections will show that Christ spiritually enables His disciples to proclaim God's wrath upon sinners and the reward of eternal life for those who become disciples of God's Son.

Christ Promises Power for Proclamation

Two affirmations of divine enablement arise from the final phrase of Matthew 28:20—"and behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." In the first phrase, "I am with you always" (καὶ ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας), Christ asserts the legitimacy and viability of biblical proclamation ministry in every generation. He promises to perpetually support His envoys as they proclaim the gospel and disciple believers in the truth of Scripture. In the sense of Christ's active presence, those who "labor at preaching the word and teaching" can be confident that their efforts are fully approved by Christ (1 Tim 5:17). His help is a continual reality for Great Commission disciplers.²²

In the second phrase of Matthew 28:20, "even to the end of the age" (ἕως τῆς συντελείας τοῦ αἰῶνος), Christ promises to sustain proclamation activities in every generation by His Holy Spirit (Acts 6:10; 8:29, 39; 10:44; 11:15; 13:2, 4; 16:6). Through the work of the Spirit, Jesus maintains His ongoing presence as Immanuel—the God who is with His people (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23).²³ By providing divine power for disciple-making,²⁴ Christ will continue to build His church (Matt 16:18) until His work is complete.²⁵ The Great Commission thus constitutes the continuous pattern for all disciples of Christ to preach and teach from the Scriptures and pass it down as a stewardship to their disciples (2 Tim 2:2). The strategies of the apostles and their disciples will never be obsolete as long as Christ's Great Commission is in force.

Christ Calls Missionaries to Proclaim Wrath and Reward

The power Christ promises for proclamation enables His missionaries to declare an uncompromising message that Christ alone is "the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through [Him]" (John 14:6). Though there are many ways that preaching and teaching might be conducted, depending on the context,

²² Affirmed by Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 749; Grant R. Osborne, *Matthew*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 1085, who recognizes the Spirit of Christ as the Agent of His ongoing presence (Acts 16:7; Rom 8:9; Gal 4:6; Phil 1:19; 1 Pet 1:11). Schnabel finds grammatical support in εἰμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας: "The formulation in the present tense ... and the reference to, literally, "all days" ... promise permanence." Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:367.

²³ So recognized by Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 888; Turner, *Matthew*, 690; and Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 534.

²⁴ For defining power as successful accomplishment of intergenerational discipleship, see Osborne, *Matthew*, 1107.

²⁵ See Turner, *Matthew*, 690; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 889; and Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 37.

situation, and audience, the undeniable reality is that to proclaim the gospel is to pronounce divine wrath and reward. Preaching and teaching is conducted obediently to the Great Commission when it proclaims the solemn warning of Mark 16:16, that unbelief will incur God's judgment, in contrast to the blessing of a demonstrable saving belief: "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned."²⁶

In a similar vein, John 20:23 highlights the spiritual seriousness of sending the disciples to new territories: "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained." The implication of these texts holds today: missionaries are sent by the Lord to deal powerfully with sin, either by communicating His forgiveness to those who repent or His condemnation to those who do not. By repentance and belief, the sinner will come to possess "life in His name" (John 20:31). On the other hand, unbelief signals the retention of sins (v. 23)—which, if left unconfessed by grace through faith, will lead to final condemnation (Rom 11:20; Heb 3:19).

Given the spiritual importance of gospel preaching, Paul identifies himself and all disciples in 2 Corinthians 5:20 as "ambassadors for Christ," who speak directly on behalf of God, such that it is "as God is pleading through [them]" (v. 20).²⁷ The appeal delivered in the proclamational act is that sinners must be reconciled to God (v. 19). Because the message of reconciliation is so central to the gospel that the disciples preach, Paul characterizes their activity as "the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18). The activity of appealing to non-believers is that of begging (δέομαι, v. 20), which refers to pleading, asking, or requesting that the sinner be reconciled to God through faith in His gracious work of forgiving their trespasses (v. 19)²⁸ in order to avoid God's judgment on the world, from which no unreconciled sinner can escape.²⁹

Before He made atonement for sin, Jesus Christ prayed that as His disciples testify of the gospel, many people would believe in Him on account of their witness (John 17:20) and be sanctified in the truth (vv. 19–20). Repentance and belief mark the apostolic *telos* of the first evangelistic sermon in Acts 2:37–40 to an inter-cultural audience, the Diaspora Jews. That the international audience repented, believed, and many were baptized (v. 41) testifies to the fact that the apostles understood the objective of their mission—to expose and deal with sin (cf. Luke 24:47; John 20:23) and baptize the new disciples (Matt 28:19; Mark 16:16).³⁰

²⁶ Ott and Strauss, who doubt the originality of the Markan passage, nevertheless appreciate the "note of urgency not present in the other Gospels," where "response to gospel preaching is a matter of eternal consequence." Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 37. Calvin recognized that the condemnation clause is theologically warranted: "Rebels, when they reject the salvation offered to them, draw down upon themselves severer punishment, and not only are involved in the general destruction of mankind, but bear the guilt of their own ingratitude." John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 388.

²⁷ For discussion of a missionary ambassador within the Hellenistic context, and the frame of mind that Paul and his fellow missionaries would have had with regard to speaking on behalf of the Lord, see Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:967–70.

²⁸ δέομαι, BDAG, 218.

²⁹ Discussed in Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:1389.

³⁰ Polhill considers Peter to have established in the sermon a kind of proclamational formula of "four essentials of the conversion experience (v. 38): repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ,

Belief in the proclaimed gospel is central to the success of the Great Commission, but the unique message of the gospel is a hard message to hear (John 6:60–66). Christ provides His power in the moment of preaching, both for the missionary who proclaims the truth and also for the hearer to perceive it as true when it is preached (Rom 1:16–17; 1 Cor 1:18, 24; 2:1–5). In the case of certain Gentiles whom Paul and his companions approached, 1 Thessalonians 1:5 records that the missionaries' gospel came to the pagan audience not only in word, "but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full assurance." The language of "power" and "full assurance" denotes that the Spirit mediated both the gospel proclamation and its reception by the hearers. The Holy Spirit caused the missionaries to grow in the total conviction that as they were preaching they were pronouncing the very oracles of God. This confidence further emboldened them to continue proclaiming the gospel to their audience.³¹

From the audience's perspective, 1 Thessalonians 2:13 describes that those whom God called into His kingdom (v. 12) "accepted" the gospel when it was preached to them, so that they approved of the truths being proclaimed. Such genuine conversion resulted from regeneration. The sinners were previously spiritually blinded to the truth, but in the moment Christ was preached, they understood that the gospel was the other-worldly, divine power of God poured out for their salvation. The example of the Thessalonian preaching event is itself not prescriptive, but it is descriptive of Christ's Great Commission promise to send His witnesses to preach by His divine enablement. The Lord's powerful presence brings comfort and confidence to all of Christ's witnesses who engage in biblical proclamation to make disciples.

The Risen Christ Tasks His Witnesses to Make Disciples

The preceding analysis of Christ's authority and empowerment leads naturally to an examination of His assigned task. According to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, the risen Christ sends His witnesses to all nations to carry out cross-cultural biblical proclamation, with the goal being to "make disciples of all the nations." These three participles in Matthew 28:19–20 clarify how "making disciples" is to be done in order to fulfill the Great Commission: by going (πορευθέντες, v. 19), by baptizing (βαπτίζοντες, v. 19), and by teaching (διδάσκοντες, v. 20). Scholars have rightly understood that "the last participles [baptizing and teaching] are a pair that explain how or by what means the disciples will fulfill their commission," and that "the chief means of making disciples is

forgiveness of sins, and receipt of the Spirit. These four generally form a single complex throughout Luke-Acts. They are the normative ingredients of conversion." John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 116.

³¹ From the term πληροφορία ("full assurance"), as treated in "πληροφορία," BDAG, 827; Gerhard Delling, "πληροφορία," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, G. W. Bromiley, and G. Friedrich, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 6:310–11; Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 1:371, §31.45. Hereafter *TDNT*.

teaching.”³² Each participle will be treated in turn to show how Christ commands missionaries to prioritize the preaching and teaching of His Word above all other activities and, in so doing, to make disciples.

Christ's Disciples Must “Make Disciples”

Grammatically, “make disciples” (μαθητεύσατε) is the finite verb of the verse and is stated in the imperative form. This form reveals that making disciples is Jesus' main command for His followers to obey.³³ The verb has the sense of being or becoming a pupil who adheres to the instruction of the teacher.³⁴ Μαθητεύω is causative, referring to instruction as the key to making disciples, where the teaching is focused on inculcating the ways of the risen Christ.³⁵

A three-fold relationship structure emerges from this causative understanding of discipleship, with essential parties working together to transmit biblical truth. The first party is Christ as the original Teacher, who lays the foundational content from Scripture. The second is the discipler, who serves as an intermediate teacher to instruct others in the way of the Teacher using biblical content.³⁶ The third is the disciple, who learns and adopts the Teacher's ways as authoritatively binding throughout life.³⁷

In this light, the distinction between making a convert and making a disciple is an important one: the conversion of the sinner is only the beginning of spiritual life, whereas being a disciple is a lifelong process of pursuing Christlikeness (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10). Once the writings of Scripture make one “wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim 3:15), they become beneficial throughout life “for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be equipped, having been thoroughly equipped for every good work” (3:16–17).

To implement this biblical pattern of discipleship, the kind of teaching that the intermediate teacher, the discipler, is to pass from Christ to the new disciple begins with evangelism, but exceeds it in order to mature converts into disciples with the

³² Quoted from Daniel M. Doriani, *Matthew* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 2:532, who cites Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 642–45; followed by Witherington, *Matthew*, 534.

³³ Doriani, *Matthew*, 2:532; Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 36.

³⁴ Μαθητεύω, BDAG, 609. Instances of disciples outside of the narrative context of the Great Commission include Joseph of Arimathea in Matthew 27:57 (ὃς καὶ αὐτὸς ἐμαθητεύθη τῷ Ἰησοῦ) and scribes referred to by Jesus in Matthew 13:52 (γραμματεὺς μαθητευθεῖς). See Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746n31. Μαθητεύω is later used by Ignatius in *1 Romans* 5.1 (Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 230) and *1 Ephesians* 3.1 (Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 184).

³⁵ Μαθητεύω, BDAG, 609. Other instances of the causative sense include Acts 14:21 (μαθητεύσαντες ἱκανοὺς) and Ignatius, *1 Ephesians* 10.1 (Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 190).

³⁶ The role and motivations of the intermediate teacher are described well in Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746.

³⁷ The role of the disciple is affirmed in Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746; Carson, “Matthew,” 666. The role of the “learner” is to continually learn (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746n31). In the context of Jesus' disciples in John 8:31, “learning” is not limited to a simple acknowledgment that the instructional content is true, but a dependent trust that the content is true and must be followed (cf. Matt 10:38; contra John 6:66).

biblical doctrine.³⁸ Christian maturity, which is the goal of discipleship “demands a total surrender of one’s identity, security and being to the Lordship of Christ.”³⁹ Maturing believers thus become the new intermediate teachers, discipling yet newer converts so that the church as a whole matures and ushers in the next generation of maturing disciples.⁴⁰

Christ’s Disciples Must “Go” to “All the Nations”

The command to make disciples emerges within a global context. Not only does Jesus consider the entire world the sphere of His mission, but He sends His disciples as message-bearers to “go” to “all the nations” (Matt 28:19). Understanding this mandate requires careful examination of the terms and concepts related to both the command to “go” to its target of “all the nations.”

Christ’s Disciples Must “Go”

Christ’s use of the passive participle “go” (πορευθέντες) in Matthew 28:19 serves the primary command to make disciples (μαθητεύσατε).⁴¹ The grammatical relationship between these terms establishes “going” as instrumental to disciple-making rather than as an independent command. The participle’s relationship to the main verb reflects how all missionary activity serves the primary goal of making disciples.

John 20:21 enriches the understanding of the Matthean command to “go” through the concept of sending: “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” The sending motif in John’s Gospel⁴² highlights Jesus’ authority to dispatch a messenger for a specific purpose. In the Great Commission as recorded in John 20:23, Jesus’ disciples are instructed to carry out the express work of forgiveness and judgment in new global contexts. It is unmistakable, then, that Christ sends His disciples into the world on a divine errand. However, the general meaning of “go” and Matthew’s repeated connection of it to the main verb “make disciples” should caution the reader

³⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1080, observes well the tendency of missionaries to misapply the teaching command in v. 19: “It is critical to note that the command is not to evangelize but to perform the broader and deeper task of ‘discipling’ the nations. Many denominations and mission groups misunderstand this and spend all their effort winning new converts rather than anchoring them in the Christian faith (in spite of the many studies that show that too few are truly converted in that initial decision).”

³⁹ Joe Kapolyo, “Matthew,” in *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary*, Tokunboh Adeyemo, gen ed. (Nairobi: WordAlive, 2006), 1170.

⁴⁰ Doriani, *Matthew*, 2:532.

⁴¹ “Πορεύω,” BDAG, 853; “μαθητεύω,” BDAG, 609. Wallace considers how πορευθέντες “fits the structural pattern for the attendant circumstance participle” in Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 645. For other “Go and...” commands in Matthew’s Gospel that demonstrate this grammatical pattern, see 2:8; 9:13; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7.

⁴² See John 3:17 (cf. v. 16); 3:34 (cf. v. 31); 4:34; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8. For a detailed discussion of the sending motif in the Gospel of John, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel’s Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 180–98.

from placing too great an emphasis on the “going,” as if the combined imperative “go and make” requires transnational movement in every case.⁴³

Nevertheless, according to Luke 24:47, Jesus commanded His disciples to testify of the gospel first in Jerusalem and move outward “to all the nations.” This pattern demonstrates not merely geographical expansion but the strategic advancement of discipleship across cultural boundaries. The scope of this cross-cultural proclamation was evident from the church’s beginning on the day of Pentecost, when “every nation under heaven” was assembled to hear Peter preach the gospel (Acts 2:5, 14–41). The Great Commission command to “go” is depicted likewise in Acts 1:8, in a general sense, as outward-going toward the farthest reaches of the inhabited Gentile world. The apostle Paul specifically defined those outward locations as places “where Christ was [not] already named,” where pioneering work was still needed because the foundation of the gospel had not yet been built there (Rom 15:20–21).⁴⁴

Since Luke authored both the Great Commission passages of Luke 24:46–49 and Acts 1:8, Jesus’ depiction of the “ends of the earth” illuminates the meaning of “all the nations.”⁴⁵ The book of Acts records how this worldwide mission unfolded historically. After witnessing in Jerusalem (Acts 1–7), the disciples moved outward into Judea and Samaria (chs. 8–9), and to the “ends of the earth” (chs. 10–28), experiencing a series of culture shifts as they moved from a heavily Jewish context (chs. 1–12) to a range of Gentile environments (chs. 13–28).⁴⁶ Early church history documents show how this outward-going pattern of missions continued. Eusebius of Caesarea recorded Mark as having ministered in Alexandria,⁴⁷ Peter in Rome,⁴⁸ Thomas in the wide Eastern expanse known as Parthia⁴⁹ and possibly into India,⁵⁰ Andrew in the Scythian territory north of and around the Black Sea,⁵¹ and still others

⁴³ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1080. Morris captures this well: “Where a participle is linked in this way with an imperative, it shares in the imperatival force (cf. 2:8, 13; 11:4; 17:27). Jesus was commanding his followers to go as well as to make disciples, though the emphasis falls on the making of disciples.” Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 746n30.

⁴⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 2:762; Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, NAC 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 267. Global evangelism was always Christ’s plan, but Israel was to receive news that Messiah had arrived first, as demonstrated in the parable of the wedding feast (Matt 22:1–10) and in Paul’s practice of typically beginning his proclamation ministry in Jewish synagogues (Acts 9:20; 13:5; 18:4).

⁴⁵ Thomas S. Moore, “‘To the End of the Earth’: The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke,” *JETS* 40, no. 3 (1997): 396.

⁴⁶ The general geographical breakdown of Acts outlined here is reproduced from Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 41.

⁴⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, Books 1–5, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Roy Joseph Deferrari, vol. 19, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 5.16 (110–11).

⁴⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.17 (111).

⁴⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, 3.1 (137).

⁵⁰ Thomas’ ministry in India is a later tradition, though not necessarily to be discredited. See editor’s note in Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1 (137n2). The tradition is doubted in John Mark Terry, “The History of Missions in the Early Church,” in John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson, eds. *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* (Nashville: B&H, 1998), 166–67.

⁵¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1 (137n3). Listed in Pratt, Sills, and Walters, *Introduction to Global Missions*, 100.

reaching the British Isles.⁵² This historical pattern provides both precedent and instruction for cross-cultural discipleship in every age.

The "Nations" Are Foreign to the Missionary

The phrase "of all nations" in Matthew 28:19 is also basic to the Scripture-centered emphasis of the Great Commission. In its plainest sense, the term "nation" (ἔθνος) refers to geopolitical nation-states.⁵³ A sociological dimension of the term accompanies the geopolitical one to highlight that a nation is an ethnic group of people united by family heritage, culture, and traditions.⁵⁴ Together a nation's geopolitical and sociological dimensions accentuate the inherently foreign nature of missionary activity. Christ's disciples must "go" to the foreign environment, where the commonalities enjoyed within the local ethnic group (the nation) will be perceived in some way as foreign to those outside of the group (the missionary).

The corollary Great Commission passage of Luke 24:47 also expresses the command to go "to all the nations," which includes both Jews and non-Jews across the world.⁵⁵ In John 20:21–23, the geopolitical destination of "nations" or "world" is not explicit, yet the universal scope of the mandate is unmistakably both Jews and Gentiles. Christ's emissaries are authorized to take to nonbelievers everywhere His peace (εἰρήνη; cf. John 14:27), which is at the soteriological core of the gospel (Eph 2:14–18).⁵⁶ For the gospel of peace (Eph 6:15) to reach "the nations," a member of one nation must directly engage a member of another nation with the goal of disciple-making.⁵⁷

⁵² That the apostles ministered on the British Isles is the subject of later growing tradition. See Eusebius of Caesarea, *Theophania*, 5.26; also his non-extant *Demonstratio Evangelica* 3.5 (as discussed in Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "Prolegomena: The Life and Writings of Eusebius of Caesarea," in *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series [New York: Christian Literature Company, 1890], 35). Possibly implied by Tertullian, in "An Answer to the Jews," in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3. The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 157–58.

Later writings record that Peter, Paul, and Joseph of Arimathea ministered in Britain, perhaps within five years of Christ's resurrection, though such specificity at a distance of centuries seems spurious. On placing Paul in the British Isles before his final return to Rome, see Dorotheous, *Synopsis de Apostol*, 9.23; also mentioned of Theodore in Henry H. Howorth, *Christianity in Roman Britain*, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 1885, vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1885), 120–21; also see; Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain*, 18; see also James Ussher, *The Whole Works of James Ussher*, 5:1. Ministry to Britain long before the third century is affirmed by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., "Introductory Note to Clement of Alexandria," in *Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)*, vol. 2, The Ante-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 165.

⁵³ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:361–65.

⁵⁴ "ἔθνος," BDAG, 276.

⁵⁵ For reasons to include, rather than exclude, the Jews in "all the nations" see Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:361–64. On the Gentile-Jewish distinctions of "nations," see Peter T. Lee and James Sung-Hwan Park, "Beyond People Group Thinking: A Critical Reevaluation of Unreached People Groups," *Missiology: An International Review* 46, no. 3 (2018): 215.

⁵⁶ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:378–80.

⁵⁷ Turner, *Matthew*, 690.

From the sociological vantage point, the physical location of the hearer is not critical. Those who do not enter new time zones but instead go next door to proclaim the gospel to a neighbor who has come from a foreign location participate in the inherently foreign task of discipling the “nations.” The goal of being sent as an ambassador of Christ to the nations need not change for one who goes less distance than another, as long as the goal remains to see the gospel extend out in concentric rings to and through the hearer from “the nations.” With the objective of reaching the “nations” in mind, however near or far the believer travels, he must be faithful to go where he is sent. He must enter into the local culture of the foreign individual as the Lord leads, and he must preach and teach God’s Word with the firm trust that the Lord will raise up new disciples among “the nations.”

The “Nations” Are Individuals within a Population

According to the Great Commission passage of Mark 16:15, the gospel must be proclaimed far and wide: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” While this command encompasses “all creation” in “all the world,” the target audience consists of individuals who are called to faith, as evidenced by the singular focus “He who has believed” (vv. 16–18). The focus of evangelism and disciple-making, therefore, is not on the sociocultural or political macrostructures of the nations themselves but on the conversion and growth of individual believers within a target population (Matt 10:18; Acts 11:18; 14:27; 15:3–7; 26:17; Rom 3:29; 9:24; 15:10; 16:4; Rev 7:9).⁵⁸

In terms of Great Commission strategy, viewing the individual within the ethnic whole of a nation is further legitimized by the immediate context of the phrase “make disciples of all the nations” in Matthew 28:19. The command to “make disciples” limits the scope of discipleship to individual people, since discipleship requires evangelizing person by person and directly baptizing and teaching new local converts so that they continually adhere to the divine truths proclaimed by the discipler.⁵⁹

Luke 24:47 provides another reason why individual transformation is Christ’s objective, not societal or geopolitical structural transformation. The phrase “to all the nations” connects with the proclamation of “repentance for forgiveness of sins . . . in His name,” revealing that the focus of Great Commission proclamation is spiritual and personal to the listener. The intention of missionary witness to the nations is thus the spiritual transformation of all hearers, Gentiles or Jews, “beginning from Jerusalem.” All nonbelievers are inherently unfit for spiritual partnership until they enter into the family of God (3 John 5–8). Nonbelievers among the Jewish people are

⁵⁸ Affirmed by Robert Garrett, “The Gospels and Acts: Jesus the Missionary and His Missionary Followers,” in *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions*, ed. John Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 72 and 72n4; *contra* Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., “Postmillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock, Counterpoints: Bible & Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 46–47.

⁵⁹ In Matthew 28:19, whereas τὰ ἔθνη (“the nations”) is neuter, the object of baptizing and teaching, αὐτοὺς (“them”), is masculine and “refers to the implied direct object of the main verb,” making disciples. See Charles L. Quarles, *Matthew, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2017), 352. In other words, it is not all nations that are being disciplined as such but individuals from all nations. See also Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:536.

“far off” from God until they are saved by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:39), and nonbelievers from among the Gentiles are decidedly worldly and immoral (Matt 18:17). No matter the background, identity, or context of the sinner, they all need the same redemption by Christ, who alone establishes and strengthens the bond of unity in the family of God (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11).

Therefore, interethnic spiritual fellowship hinges on the proclamation of the gospel and the repentance of individual hearers, concentrically moving out from Jerusalem “to all the nations” where there are new individual hearers. Such a spiritual emphasis in the Great Commission reinforces that the reason to go to the nations, more than any other purpose, is to make individual disciples of Christ, who will bear His image in continually God-glorifying ways (2 Cor 3:18).

Christ's Disciples Must “Baptize”

The second participle in Matthew 28:19, “baptizing” (βαπτίζοντες), builds upon the discipleship mandate by characterizing the activity of the discipler with new believers. The command to baptize in the Matthean Great Commission highlights baptism as a unique feature of discipleship, since it is separated from the teaching content identified in verse 20 as “all that I have commanded you.”⁶⁰ This distinction sets the stage for baptism's role as an outward, physical demonstration of the believer's inward commitment to Christ.

In the New Testament, baptism is consistently portrayed as a believing individual's full immersion into water. Jesus commanded water baptism within the context of John the Baptist's established practice in the Jordan River, as modeled in his preaching ministry (Matt 3:1–12; Mark 1:4–8; Luke 3:3; 7:29; John 3:23; cf. Acts 11:16; 13:24; 19:1–7), which Jesus Himself fulfilled (Matt 3:13–17). Following Christ's resurrection, the early church adopted full-immersion water baptism as a standard activity of new converts, who were adults or maturing adolescents capable of professing their faith (Acts 2:38, 41; 1 Cor 1:10–17; Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27; Col 2:12).⁶¹

Furthermore, the Markan Great Commission passage connects full-immersion water baptism to the believer's submission to the gospel (Mark 16:16), wherever he or she may be in the world (v. 15). Water baptism is not a means of salvation but rather a public testimony of saving grace already accomplished through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶² This distinction clarifies its role in the conversion story of the new believer. In terms of baptism's logical and chronological placement, “baptism is the initiatory step, to be taken at the beginnings of discipleship.”⁶³ In this sense,

⁶⁰ Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1989), 11, with discussion on 12, 15. On the distorted applications of the ordinance of full-immersion water baptism in insider movements, see John Massey and Scott N. Callaham, “Baptism as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy,” in *World Mission: Theology, Strategy, and Current Issues*, ed. Scott N. Callaham and Will Brooks (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2019), 168–74.

⁶¹ Matt Waymeyer, *A Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2008), 11–15; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:358 (iv); G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 359.

⁶² Calvin and Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:387–88.

⁶³ Kapolyo, “Matthew,” 1170. Also emphasized in Waymeyer, *Biblical Critique of Infant Baptism*, 93; Massey and Callaham, “Baptism as Integral Component of World Mission Strategy,” 152–53.

“baptizing” is the missionary’s means of helping a new believer to symbolize his or her identification with Christ’s community of disciples. As to missions strategy, then, the event of full-immersion water baptism shifts the missionary’s tasks from evangelism to discipleship in the context of the local church.

The baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 itself signifies disciple-making in seed form, as new believers must demonstrate at least a basic understanding that the God of the Bible is triune. Baptism “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος) references the essential unity of the divine Persons, to whom the disciple must fully commit.⁶⁴ Converts must agree that salvation history reached its apex in the gospel, revealing the Triune God to all peoples for their obedient worship.⁶⁵ No other god nor any other concept or identification of God is acceptable for one who is now identified with the death, burial, resurrection, and glorified life of the Son of God (Rom 6:3–11). Moreover, the expression “in the Name” indicates the spiritual relationship of the believer to the triune God as one of possession and authority. The convert has come under the ownership of the King and publicly declares so in word and act.

Baptizing by immersion in water into the Trinitarian name is a critical physical act for all true believers to perform. It serves to demonstrate the spiritual fellowship that the disciple has with the three Persons of God Himself.⁶⁶ For this reason, baptism should never be considered an empty, archaic formula, but a profound verbal declaration of the new disciple’s new life of biblical faith. It represents the believer’s identification with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Rom 6:3–7). This symbolic act epitomizes disciple-making, as it provides both the baptizer and the baptized with a profound opportunity to publicly assert the theological and relational truths that define a life fully submitted to the lordship of the Triune God.

Christ’s Disciples Are “Witnesses” Who “Teach”

The third participle in Matthew’s Great Commission account is “teaching” (διδάσκοντες) in Matthew 28:20, which Christ explains as “teaching them to keep all that I commanded you” (διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν). Jesus’ commands in the Gospels now become the commands of His students, who must teach them to future students. The transference of authority from Christ to His disciples is expressed by the verb “command” (ἐντέλλω), which refers to giving orders or instructions of all kinds.⁶⁷ The object of the participle “teaching”

⁶⁴ Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 748; Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1269; France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1117.

⁶⁵ Calvin well elucidated the significance of naming the Trinity in the baptismal command of verse 19: “This passage shows that the full and clear knowledge of God, which had been but darkly shadowed out under *the Law and the Prophets*, is at length fully discovered under the reign of Christ.... Thus we perceive that God cannot be truly known, unless our faith distinctly conceive of Three Persons in one essence; and that the fruit and efficacy of *baptism* proceed from God *the Father* adopting us through his *Son*, and, after having cleansed us from the pollutions of the flesh through *the Spirit*, creating us anew to righteousness.” Calvin and Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 387. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Cottrell, *Baptism*, 16.

⁶⁷ “ἐντέλλω,” BDAG, 339. The verb describes the cognate ἐντολή, which encompasses all forms of instructions and commands. “ἐντολή,” BDAG, 340.

is the expression πάντα ὅσα, meaning “all that” or “everything.” In context, this referent encompasses the content of Jesus’ speech and righteous conduct in the Gospels—everything he taught on the foundation of the Old Testament and everything that can be observed about His obedient life.⁶⁸ The expression intensifies Jesus’ command that they train new disciples to be obedient to “every last thing Jesus says” (cf. Matt 5:19).⁶⁹

This teaching ministry is intimately connected to the role of witness. Luke, himself a Gentile, highlights Jesus’ concern for a universal mission “to all nations” on the basis of the disciples’ testimony of the gospel (Luke 24:47). In Luke 24:48, Jesus uses the term “witnesses” (μάρτυρες) as the earliest description of those who undertake the Great Commission challenge to assert biblical truth “to all the nations.”⁷⁰ The disciples represent the connotations of the term—they are reliable eyewitnesses that declare and defend their experiences to others in order to establish truth. He calls His disciples to bear testimony of “these things” (τούτων), which is a demonstrative pronoun that covers the written predictions of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ (v. 46). These teachings link back to the Old Testament (v. 44) and reach forward to the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness of sins that will usher from Jerusalem through the disciples (v. 47).⁷¹ The range of scriptural content that constitutes “these things” in Luke 24:48 corresponds to “all that” in Matthew 28:20, indicating that Jesus’ authority lays behind the commands of the Old Testament also.

Jesus’ use of “proclaim” (κηρύσσω) in Luke 24:47 helps disciples of all generations to uphold the act of teaching as public, vocal proclamation.⁷² Great Commission proclamation activities encompass a broad range of instruction,⁷³ centrally focused on preaching and teaching the text of the Bible. Proclamation activities prioritize the ministries of Bible translation, biblical exposition, theological education, and a range of practical applications to matters of local church governance, public worship, ministry, and Christian conduct. Given the range of activities both possible and necessary, missionaries must be careful not to become distracted and neglect any theological concept or passage, since every word of Scripture constitutes “all that [Christ] commanded” (Matt 28:20) and is prescribed for use everywhere and among all recipients.

The content of this teaching is extensive. Some of the biblical themes that the earliest disciples were careful to teach include the following:

⁶⁸ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1118–19. Nolland, *Gospel of Matthew*, 1270, recognizes that the use of τηρέω in the context of ἐντέλλω harkens back to Matthew 19:17, in which τήρησον τὰς ἐντολάς connects obedience (τηρέω, “keeping”) to the Ten Commandments.

⁶⁹ Doriani, *Matthew*, 2:532; Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:368–70.

⁷⁰ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:368–69.

⁷¹ Schnabel emphasizes that obedient disciples stem from obedient disciplers: “They do not preach themselves or their interpretation of Torah but rather God’s revelatory acts in and through Jesus.” Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:382. Such external acts reveal “the ‘internal significance’ of Jesus the Messiah and his procurement of salvation for people.” Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:368–69.

⁷² Κηρύσσω, BDAG, 543–44.

⁷³ For pushback against a narrow view of “preaching” as the Great Commission task of proclamation, see Witherington, *Matthew*, 534.

Jesus' life and ministry (Acts 1:21–22), His death and resurrection, His vindication and His exaltation (Acts 1:22), the salvation “from this corrupt generation” (Acts 2:40), the word of the Lord (Acts 8:25), the necessity of conversion and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21), the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24), the message of Jesus (Acts 23:11), the kingdom of God (Acts 28:23).⁷⁴

Such comprehensive proclamation demands an obedient response by the hearer—belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the active surrender to His lordship (cf. Luke 24:44–47). The hope of the gospel is that once sinners hear the Word of Christ proclaimed, they have the opportunity to obey Him.⁷⁵ Paul connected obedience to Christ with the message of Christ. In Romans 10:8–17 and 15:18, he described his pioneering missionary goal as “the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed” (15:18), a newfound confession of faith that ushers from the Holy Spirit as His disciples are sent out to preach “the word of faith” (10:8), which is the “word of Christ” (10:17).

Proclamation ministry begins with evangelism, as it is the preparatory stage of teaching Jesus' commands, in which He calls for the repentance and belief of all people (Matt 4:17; cf. 9:13; Mark 1:15; cf. 6:16; Luke 5:32; 13:3, 5; 24:47; John 3:16–18; cf. 14:6). Evangelistic contacts are instructed to be converted, and converts are instructed to mature within the context of a local church, based on all that Jesus has commanded in Scripture.⁷⁶ The teaching ministry with which the missionary is tasked progresses from the believer's initial faith through evangelism to full sanctification through more mature doctrinal instruction. As believers grow in their convictions, they continually conform to the image of Christ.

In order for this pattern of proclamation to instill a sanctified way of life, the teacher himself must adhere to the full range of the biblical content as his own way of life.⁷⁷ The teacher's words and the lifestyle must correspond manifestly, in line with Paul's goal for teaching doctrine: “love from a pure heart and a good conscience and an unhyprocritical faith” (1 Tim 1:5). According to 1 Timothy 4:15–16, the missionary is to “take pains” to “be absorbed” in all teaching, paying “close attention” to [him]self and to [his] teaching.” The purpose is that his own progress in the truth “will be evident to all” and thus serve as God's means for seeing others genuinely saved. In his missionary context of Ephesus, Timothy was commanded to “teach and preach” (δίδασκε καὶ παρακάλει, 1 Tim 6:2) in a way that would help the

⁷⁴ Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 1:370.

⁷⁵ “Teaching is not merely a transfer of knowledge but a transformation of life in obedience.... Making disciples involves calling people to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, submitting every aspect of their lives to his lordship.” In Ott and Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 36.

⁷⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 887, considers the latter the task of Great Commission teaching: “The emphasis in the commission thus falls not on the initial proclamation of the gospel but more on the arduous task of nurturing into the experience of discipleship.” Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431, recognizes that discipleship “proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.”

⁷⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 888; Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, 749.

growing body of believers to embrace “doctrine conforming to godliness” and exert godly behavior (v. 3).⁷⁸

Therefore, teaching is a discipling activity from Christ to His disciples first, and, through them, to the next disciples. Teaching as Christ’s “witnesses” reflects the importance of imparting the full content of Jesus’ teachings in His Word to new converts. The goal of the missionary’s instruction is that the next generation of believers will be obedient to all that Jesus commands as the missionary is, and once more pass down the faith to others (Ps 145:4; 2 Tim 2:2).

Conclusion

Viewing the Great Commission across its five key passages helps all who desire to be faithful in their witness for Christ in the world to focus their efforts on proclamation ministry. What emerges most centrally from this analysis is how Scripture itself, authorized by Christ’s supreme authority and empowered by His Spirit, plays an indispensable role in accomplishing the Great Commission. The transformative theology of Scripture is the Holy Spirit’s instrument in the hands of His servants to make new disciples through preaching and teaching where Christ has not yet been named (Rom 15:20).

The ministry of the apostolic church exemplifies the biblical pattern of the Great Commission. Beginning in Jerusalem and extending further into the Gentile world, the earliest disciples demonstrated that faithful proclamation of the Word results in sinners being saved and local churches established for the ongoing work of maturing the disciples worldwide (cf. Acts 6:2, 4; 18:5; 20:20–21; 1 Cor 10:33; 1 Thess 1:5; 2:8–9, 16).⁷⁹ Contemporary missionaries stand in this same line of ministry, wielding the same authoritative Word in all global contexts.

Because Christ is powerful to save sinners everywhere, His disciples can undertake His mission with both humility and confident hope in His Word. They will do even “greater works” than the apostles, as the Holy Spirit sends them out to bring in a global harvest for the glory of the Son (John 14:12). Christ’s prayer for the Father’s providential guidance and protection of His disciples (John 17) continues to be answered as He spiritually empowers each new generation to fulfill the Great Commission. Every day, as believers mature in their faith and go out as Christ’s witnesses to make new disciples in ever widening reaches of the world, they participate in God’s purpose of filling the earth with the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). All glory belongs to the risen Christ, who will continue to build His church through His messengers until the end of the church age.

⁷⁸ The verb *παρακαλέω* in 1 Tim 6:2 refers to proclaiming a word of exhortation, comfort, or encouragement, which is essential for helping believers in their sanctification. See *παρακαλέω*, BDAG, 764–65; Otto Schmitz, “*Παρακαλέω, Παράκλησις*,” *TDNT*, 5:773–79.

⁷⁹ For theological and historical discussion of preaching and teaching as “the central process of missionary work” for Paul and the apostles, see Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission*, 2:977–78, with the quote on page 978.