

Chapter 117: The Great Commission

Matthew 28:16–20

The final five verses of the Gospel of Matthew are not merely the end of the book. Rather, these give a perfect summary of what Jesus has modeled and taught throughout, as well as a perfect summation of what Jesus wants us to do with this message. The story of Jesus is stunning and jarring, since he is without comparison as one who rises from the dead. It is normal and natural to be confused about how to move forward on the basis of this story, and, indeed, we could not hope to know what Jesus wants from us unless he himself told us. Thankfully, the conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew tells us precisely what our Lord wants from us: *Jesus commissions confused people to extend his cosmic kingdom into all nations.*

Confused Worshipers (Matt. 28:16–17)

In obedience to the instructions of both the angel and of Jesus himself (Matt. 26:32; 28:7, 10), the disciples go to meet the resurrected Jesus in Galilee. In a matter-of-fact tone that conveys the sorrow of Judas's betrayal, Matthew no longer speaks of "the twelve" but of "the eleven disciples" who have come to Galilee.¹ Yet, there is a silver lining to this remnant: "the eleven' *includes* Peter."² Matthew does not include any story of Peter's reconciliation with Jesus after Peter's denial (cf. Luke 24:12, 34; John 21). This description of "the eleven"—rather than "the ten"—serves as the only indication that Peter has not been cast off, in spite of his failure. More broadly, the presence of the eleven indicates that *all* the disciples (apart from Judas) have been restored to ministry after abandoning Jesus: "The preparation of the Twelve as Jesus' task force, which had apparently ended in irreversible disaster in 26:56, is now resumed as they (or rather eleven of them) are restored to their position of trust and responsibility and given the final instructions for fulfilling the mission for which they were originally called in 10:1–15."³

While we do not know for certain which mountain Jesus chose to meet his disciples, it is noteworthy that this meeting should be in Galilee. While the Gospel of John records that Jesus took visits to Jerusalem during festivals (e.g., John 2:13, 23; 5:1; 7:10; 10:22), Matthew records only Jesus' climactic journey into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, culminating later that week in Jesus' crucifixion. Instead, Matthew portrays the vast majority of Jesus' ministry as taking place in Galilee: "The extended period of confrontation and rejection in Jerusalem, which ended in the apparent triumph of the opposition, is now relegated to the past. Jesus the Galilean has triumphed against all the odds, and back in his home territory (and that of his disciples) where the mission was originally launched,

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 744.

² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 883.

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1107–08.

the good news of the kingdom of heaven is sent out in a proclamation which will continue until the ‘end of the age.’”⁴ The old Jerusalem would only be the launching point for the mission, from which Jesus will build a New Jerusalem throughout the whole world (Acts 1:8; Rev. 21:2). Further, Hagner writes, “The consummation of the story will thus take place where the ministry began: in ‘Galilee of the Gentiles’ the light dawns that overcomes the shadow of death (4:15–16) and makes possible the mission to the Gentiles (v 19).”⁵

Commentators debate whether anyone else was present for this encounter. On the one hand, Matthew only mentions “the eleven,” so that some commentators reject any idea of other witnesses: “Matthew has very specifically limited the number of people present to eleven, and has mentioned no additional group.”⁶ On the other hand, some point out that the angel had told the women that Jesus would go “before *you* to Galilee” (Matt. 28:7), and these commentators infer that the women also must have been present.⁷ Additionally, Nolland reminds us that the women had accompanied Jesus from Galilee down to Jerusalem, but they are only mentioned after Jesus’ death. So, “Just as the women have been invisible companions on the journey to Jerusalem (see at 27:55), so they appear to be invisible companions in the present episode.”⁸ It is also possible that Paul’s report that five hundred people saw the resurrected Jesus at once could have happened here in Galilee (1 Cor. 15:6);⁹ however, nothing in this passage directly suggests a broader audience.

Matthew then reports, “And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted” (v. 17). Like the women who met Jesus on their way from the tomb (Matt. 28:9), the disciples now worship Jesus. Lenski rightly observes that “This worship is the recognition of his deity, the adoration of Jesus as the Son of God. Only after the resurrection did the disciples engage in this form of adoration (compare the remarks on v. 9); for all the Jews were averse to worshipping a creature; and so the act here reported is proof of their faith in Jesus as God exalted over all that is created.”¹⁰ Unlike the clear statement from the very first verse in the Gospel of John, Matthew reveals the fact that Jesus is God more subtly. Matthew reveals a major plank of proving the true divinity of Jesus by showing these two instances of worshiping Jesus, although he will continue to develop this idea in the remainder of this section.

More curious—and perhaps even concerning—is the statement that “some doubted” (v. 17b). The Gospel of John tells us that *Thomas* had doubted, but that even Thomas’s doubts were resolved the Sunday following Jesus’ resurrection when Jesus permitted Thomas to see him and to touch him, so that Thomas’s were so thoroughly resolved that he hailed Jesus, exclaiming, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:26–28).¹¹ This appearance in Galilee must certainly come after this event, so that it is difficult to see why any of the disciples would continue to *doubt* Jesus. Some have argued that the disciples may have doubted whether the person they saw at a distance was Jesus until he came closer

⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1107.

⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 – 28*, 883.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1111.

⁷ e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1167; Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1262.

⁸ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1262.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1167.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1168.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 745.

and “laid aside the form of a servant,” in order to make “the splendor of his divine glory...manifest” so that, from that point forward, he “had nothing in his appearance but what was heavenly.”¹² Others have suggested argued that the doubts may have arisen from the individuals beyond of the eleven who were present (e.g., the women and the five hundred people mentioned in 1 Cor. 15:6).¹³

While these explanations are possible, the simpler explanation is to understand that the word “refers more to hesitation than to unbelief.”¹⁴ This word for “doubt” appears in only one other context in the New Testament, when Peter began to sink into the water when he came out of his boat to meet Jesus. There, Jesus says, “O you of little faith, why did you *doubt*?” (Matt. 14:31). In my view, Hagner offers the most satisfying explanation of the meaning and the pastoral significance of this statement:

It is natural to believe that the eleven disciples would have been in a state of hesitation and indecision. Too much had happened too fast for them to be able to assimilate it. They did not doubt that it was Jesus whom they saw and whom they gladly worshiped. If their faith was too small in measure, that was because they were in a state of uncertainty about what the recent events meant and what might happen next....To such people, who are far from being perfect, Jesus gives the commission to make disciples of the nations (Bruner, Stendahl)—a commission, as we have already noted, that is framed with a comforting statement and promise.¹⁵

At the very least, France notes how like it is that the disciples “did not know how to respond to Jesus in this new situation, where he was familiar and yet now different; cf. the bewilderment and fear of the three disciples who witnessed the Transfiguration (17:1–7).”¹⁶

A Cosmic Kingdom (Matt. 28:18)

Jesus abolishes the doubts of these disciples in a simple, but staggering, statement: “And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (v. 18). As we have noted throughout our study of this Gospel, Matthew has been building the case for Jesus’ kingship as the rightful Son of David (Matt. 1:1). Now, Jesus explains that his reign as the heir to the throne of David extends beyond one region, since it is cosmic in scope.¹⁷

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:381.

¹³ e.g., Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 745.

¹⁴ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 430.

¹⁵ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 885–86.

¹⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1112.

¹⁷ “Here at the end of the gospel, then, we find the culmination of the theme of kingship which was introduced by the Davidic royal genealogy (1:1–17), developed in the magi’s search for the “king of the Jews” and the political threat to Herod in ch. 2, adumbrated in the developing language of Messiahship, and dramatically enacted in Jesus’ royal ride to Jerusalem (21:1–11); since then Jesus’ alleged claim to kingship has been a matter of accusation and mockery (27:11, 29, 37, 42), but now the true nature of that kingship is revealed. It stands far above local politics and extends far beyond the people of Israel. It is the universal kingship

Now, this is not the first time that Jesus has declared his authority. It is essential to recognize that, according to his divine nature, he never relinquished absolute authority in heaven and on earth: “what Christ possessed in his own right was given to him by the Father in our flesh, or—to express it more clearly—in the person of the Mediator.”¹⁸ Further, even when Jesus labored in his estate of humiliation in the form of a servant, he had already made several claims about his authority, as Hagner reminds us: “Already during his ministry he had made statements about his authority. In 9:6 (cf. 9:8) he referred to the...‘authority,’ given to the Son of Man...‘upon the earth,’ in this case to forgive sins (cf. Dan 7:14 with respect to the Son of Man). In 11:27 he made the astonishing claim that...‘all things have been given to me by my Father.’”¹⁹

Yet, Jesus has now finished the work in his estate of humiliation that had been assigned to him by his Father: “On one occasion the tempter took Jesus to a high mountain in order to show him the kingdoms of this world and their glory in order to induce him to avoid the cross in obtaining the kingdom. Now Jesus himself shows his disciples the kingdoms of this world after the cross had been borne and points out the conquest his sacrifice and his love shall achieve through the gospel.”²⁰ From this point forward, all that remains is his estate of exaltation: “As on the mount of the transfiguration (17:1–8), the veil is taken away—but now permanently—so that the glorious identity of Jesus becomes plain (cf. 26:64).”²¹

A Commission to Make Disciples (Matt. 28:19–20)

At the conclusion of Matthew’s Gospel, we find Jesus’ great commission to his disciples: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (vv. 19–20). At a high level, Blomberg notes how this commission gives a fitting conclusion to many of the themes that we have observed within the Gospel of Matthew up to this point: “This short account contains the culmination and combination of all of Matthew’s central themes: (1) the move from particularism to universalism in the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom; (2) discipleship and the establishment of the church; (3) Jesus’ commands as ultimately incumbent on Christians; and (4) the abiding presence of Jesus as teacher, as divine Son of God, and the risen and sovereign Lord of the universe.”²² At a more detailed level, let us consider each element of this heavily freighted phrase.

First, we should note the logical connection of “therefore” (v. 19a). Jesus issues his Great Commission *on the basis and grounds of* the authority that he has received over all of heaven and earth. As King, Jesus commands exactly this. Second, the grammar of the verbs and participles in the passage has been much discussed. Osborne offers a clear explanation: “The circumstantial participle

of the Son of Man which has emerged as a distinctive feature of Matthew’s presentation of Jesus: 13:41; 16:28; 19:28; 20:21; 25:31–34.” (France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1113.)

¹⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:382.

¹⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886.

²⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 1170.

²¹ Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 886.

²² Blomberg, *Matthew*, 429.

‘go’...followed by the main verb is a common Matthean stylistic trait, and it becomes in effect another imperative, ‘Go and make disciples.’ In fact, the two participles that follow (‘baptizing’ and ‘teaching’) are also circumstantial and are imperatival in force. Still, the main verb ‘make disciples’ dominates, and all are aspects of that central part of the commission.”²³ To summarize, the main thrust of the Great Commission is to “make disciples,” but this work of disciple-making requires three activities expressed here in participial phrases that carry imperatival force to Jesus’ church: make disciples by going, baptizing, and teaching.

Nolland helpfully summarizes the way that this theme of discipleship has preceded this passage and is now expanded as a part of this great commission:

Jesus’ freshly confirmed authority is the basis for his new directive now to the disciples. Matthew has already introduced the idea of *being disciplined* in 13:52, where the imagery was of the disciples being disciplined to be scribes of the kingdom and where the scribe was seen, as are the Eleven now in 28:19, as a discipling disciple: the treasure he has gained is a treasure he passes out to others. More recently Matthew has used the language of being disciplined in 27:57 of Joseph of Arimathea, who initiative in relation to the burial of Jesus is based on his having been disciplined to Jesus. Matthew restricts his use of the noun ‘disciple’ ...to the Twelve, but by making a wider use of other language markers of discipleship and more pointedly by his wider use of the cognate verb ‘disciple’...Matthew indicates that the disciples of the Twelve, though unique and unrepeatable, embodies patterns of discipleship which are of a more general relevance.²⁴

Thus, the nature of Jesus’ reign is not expressed through forcing people into submission through brute force, but by teaching people to bring every facet of their lives under the authority of Jesus. As Jesus’ has taught his own disciples, that teaching must extend to every new generation of disciples until the day when Jesus returns again.

As for the *going*, Blomberg observes that “Too much and too little have often been made of this observation. Too much is made of it when the disciples’ ‘going’ is overly subordinated, so that Jesus’ charge is to proselytize merely where one is....Too little is made of it when all attention is centered on the command to ‘go,’ as in countless appeals for missionary candidates, so that foreign missions are elevated to a higher status of Christian service than other forms of spiritual activity.”²⁵ So, on the one hand, the *going* does indeed stand “in rather sharp contrast to ‘Go not’ of 10:5. Cf. 15:24. It is clear that the particularism of the pre-resurrection period has now definitely made place for universalism.”²⁶ Thus, God’s people are truly called to go to “all nations” (v. 19b; especially beyond the bounds of the Jewish nation) for the sake of making disciples of Jesus.²⁷ Even so, not all are called

²³ Osborne, *Matthew*, 1080.

²⁴ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1265.

²⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 431.

²⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 999.

²⁷ “Here Christ, by removing the distinction, makes the Gentiles equal to the Jews, and admits both, indiscriminately to a participation in the covenant. Such is also the import of the term: go out; for the prophets

to serve as foreign missionaries. No matter what one's calling may be, each of us is required to make disciples as we go.

That work of disciple-making then requires both *baptizing* and *teaching*. It is important to see that the *baptizing* precedes the *teaching*, making the former the one-time work of initiation, and the latter the perpetual work of discipleship. Thus, there is no conflict or minimization of teaching when we baptize our infants as a means of initiating them into God's covenant family as our youngest disciples, and then undertaking the long-term work of discipling them to grow into the full stature of Christ.²⁸ The same is true for those who convert to faith in Christ: we baptize them as the beginning—not the culmination—of their discipleship. That is, Jesus presents baptism as more of an “initiation” than a “graduation ceremony.”²⁹

Jesus commands that this baptism be “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 19c). Jesus himself had been baptized to fulfill all righteousness (Matt. 3:15), and now he commands that disciples be baptized in the (singular) name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Thus, “the baptism which John had originally instituted as a symbol of a new beginning for repentant Israel (3:1–12) is now to be extended to people from all nations.”³¹ By this statement, we find another way that Matthew underscores the divine nature of Jesus. France writes:

It is one thing for Jesus to speak about his relationship with God as Son with Father (notably 11:27; 24:36; 26:63–64) and to draw attention to the close links between himself and the Holy Spirit (12:28, 31–32), but for “the Son” to take his place as the middle member, between the Father and the Holy Spirit, in a threefold depiction of the object of the disciple's allegiance is extraordinary. The human leader of the disciple group has become the rightful object of their worship. And the fact that the three divine persons are spoken of as having a single “name” is a significant pointer toward the trinitarian doctrine of three persons in one God.³²

Trinitarian theology holds that the external works of the three persons of God are indivisible. Therefore, being baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit does not merely remind us of the unity of the Godhead amid the three persons; more than that, we are reminded of the distinct, but inseparable works of each person for our salvation: “the fruit and efficacy of *baptism*

under the law had limits assigned to them, but now, the wall of partition having been broken down, (Ephesians 2:14,) the Lord commands the ministers of the gospel to go to a distance, in order to spread the doctrine of salvation in every part of the world.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:384.)

²⁸ “And yet this does not involve the separation of *baptism* from faith and doctrine; because, though infants are not yet of such an age as to be capable of receiving the grace of God by faith, still God, when addressing their parents, includes them also. I maintain, therefore, that it is not rash to administer baptism to infants, to which God invites them, when he promises that *he will be their God*.” (Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:386.)

²⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1115–16.

³⁰ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 748.

³¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1108.

³² France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1118.

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.”³³

We should notice that in commanding his disciples to be busy with “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (v. 20a), he retains control over the teaching: “Christ shows that, in sending the apostles, he does not entirely resign his office, as if he ceased to be the Teacher of his Church; for he sends away the apostles with this reservation, that they shall not bring forward their own inventions, but shall purely and faithfully deliver from hand to hand (as we say) what he has entrusted to them.”³⁴ Teachers appointed in Christ’s church execute their office not by innovation, but by carefully handing down the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Finally, Jesus closes with a promise of his ongoing presence: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20b). Within the Gospel of Matthew, the idea of Jesus’ presence with his people brings us all the way back to the beginning of the Gospel, when the angel who appeared to Joseph had called Jesus “‘Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matt. 1:23).³⁵ Nolland notes the contrast between this conclusion and what we find in other Gospels: “Whereas both Luke and John clarify this role in terms of ascension to heaven, Matthew...wants to stress the continuing presence of Jesus.”³⁶ Jesus’ own, personal presence by his Spirit provides the certainty that the gates of hell will never prevail against the church (Matt. 16:18). Thus, “at the heart of this new community of faith is Jesus himself, as he had said he would be (18:20): they are to be *his* disciples, obeying *his* commandments, and sustained by *his* unending presence among them.”³⁷ Through his enduring, spiritual presence, Jesus continues to make disciples, just as he began to do in this Gospel.

Discussion Questions

1. Whom does “the eleven disciples” exclude (v. 16a)? Whom does this company of disciples include? Within the context of the Gospel of Matthew, what is so significant about Galilee (v. 16b)? What significance should we draw from the fact that his disciples “worshiped him” (v. 17a)? What does it mean that “some doubted” (v. 17b)? Why do you think Matthew so freely acknowledges the hesitations and confusions of the disciples upon meeting Jesus in Galilee?
2. How has Matthew been telling us about the kingship of Jesus since the very first verse of this Gospel (Matt. 1:1)? Over what kind of a kingdom did David reign? Over what kind of a kingdom does Jesus reign (v. 18)? How does the cosmic reign of Jesus explain the significance of Jesus’ regular description of himself as the “Son of Man” (see Dan. 7:13–14)? What authority did Jesus have before his resurrection? What changed after the resurrection?
3. What significance does the word “therefore” have in v. 19? What does Jesus mean when he tells us to “go” (v. 19a)? What does it mean to “make disciples” (v. 19b)? What has changed from Jesus’

³³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:387.

³⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 3:390.

³⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1108.

³⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1271.

³⁷ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1108.

limitation of the ministry of his disciples only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel to now extending that ministry to “all nations” (v. 19c; cf. Matt. 10:5–6)? Why do we baptize (v. 19d)? Why do we baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (v. 19e)?

4. What role does teaching play in disciple-making (v. 20a)? How does the ongoing teaching ministry of the church relate to Jesus’ role as our ultimate Teacher? Why does Matthew conclude this Gospel with a promise of Jesus’ perpetual presence with us, “always, to the end of the age” (v. 20b)? What has been most impactful for you personally in our study of Matthew? What is one way that the study of this book has challenged you in your life today?