

The Missional Community

Jesus' Presence in Our Mission (Matthew 28:16-20)

The concluding verses of the Gospel of Matthew are commonly known as the "Great Commission." What makes the "Great Commission" great? Unlike the "Great Commandment" (Matthew 22:37-40) the "Great Commission" is not great because the text explicitly states that it is great. Therefore, there must be another reason that Jesus' final commission to his disciples has earned the label "great." In order to discover this reason, we must put the commission in its context.

The commission is given by Jesus to his disciples "on the mount which Jesus had designated" (Matthew 28:16b). Matthew does a masterful job of weaving together former themes and bringing them to a climax in this final scene. By placing the commission in a mountain setting, Matthew is alluding to all the previous mountain settings in his Gospel and showing their intended goal in this final commission.

- In the temptation account, Satan offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for Jesus' worship (Matthew 4:8-11). Here, in the final mountain scene, Jesus is shown to possess all the kingdoms of the world, not through worship of the evil one, but by absolute obedience to the will of the Father.
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus positioned himself as the new lawgiver who is the final interpreter of Moses' law: "You have heard it said ... but I say unto you" (Matthew 5:21, 27, 31, 33, 38, 43). Now, in the final mountain scene, Jesus calls for absolute obedience to all that he has commanded as he creates a new nation from all the nations.
- At the mount of transfiguration, Jesus' messianic glory was revealed to three close friends as he stood in the midst of Moses and Elijah (Matthew 17:1-8). Now, on the final mount, Jesus' messianic glory is clearly evident to all, and it far exceeds the great lawgiver and prophet. This gives added emphasis to God's word on the mountain, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5)
- At the Mount of Olives, Jesus humbly entered into Jerusalem as its messianic king (Matthew 21:1-11). A week later the same crowds who shouted "Hosanna to the Son of David" cried out for his crucifixion. Now, on the final mount, it is evident that their first reaction was the right one. Jesus truly is the triumphant king, God's messiah, the chosen One of God.

Perhaps Matthew wants us to view this final mountain scene as a new Mount Sinai. There God revealed his law through his servant Moses. Now, the fullness of God's demands have been made known through the new and final lawgiver, Christ, in his Sermon on the Mount and other extended discourses in Matthew. On Mount Sinai, Moses' face shown with a derived glory - a glory that soon faded away. Now, on the new mount, Jesus is shown to have an intrinsic glory, a glory that is everlasting and will not fade away. There, on Mount Sinai, Israel gained her identity as a nation. Now, on the new mountain, Jesus creates a new people, a new nation, out of people from every nation.

The vision of Jesus on the mountain prompted two responses from his followers: "And when they saw Him, they worshipped him; but some were doubtful" (Matthew 20:17). It appears that most of his disciples worshipped him, but some were hesitant to do so. What was the reason for their uncertainty? Perhaps Matthew intends this to be another "little faith" allusion. Throughout his Gospel the disciples are constantly pictured as men of "little faith" (Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). The disciples were prone to be weighed down by earthly cares and concerns which immobilized them, revealing their need for a fuller expression of faith. Their "partial" or "little faith" may be the source of their "doubt" but I think that there might be more going on here.

The Greek word translated "doubtful" is "edistasan." It can also be translated "uncertainty" or "indecision." This nuance presents a completely different possible reason for their hesitancy.

Did they hesitate over, or doubt, whether it was truly Jesus? Or did they hesitate over, or doubt, whether they, as good Jewish monotheists, believing in YHWH as the one true God, should actually worship Jesus? It isn't clear. What is clear is that the majority of them did worship Jesus, and that Matthew firmly believes this was the right reaction. (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*, p.206)

Whatever the case, Matthew wants us to see Jesus in all his splendor. In this climactic final scene, we finally see who Jesus really is in all the fullness of his glory, a fullness that Matthew has been developing from the opening lines of his Gospel.

- Jesus is the Son of David, the rightful King, the one greater than David. From the first verse Matthew had made this plain: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, *the son of David*, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1). Now this is fully evident to all, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth" (Matthew 28:18). Israel's rejection of Jesus' lordship did not thwart God's intention to establish Jesus as the true Son of David.
- Jesus is the Son of Abraham. Again, from the first verse Matthew had made this plain: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, *the son of Abraham*" (Matthew 1:1). Now we see that the true Son of Abraham is the full realization of the promise given to Abraham that "your seed shall be a blessing to the nations" (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; cf. Matthew 8:10-12, 21:43; Galatians 3:8). Now the proper response is to "go into all the world - all the nations - and make disciples."
- Jesus is the new Moses, the new lawgiver that Moses himself spoke of in his law: "Yahweh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him" (Deuteronomy 18:15). Moses' command is clear: "Listen to him." Moses had stated that true prophetic predications would validate the prophet (Deuteronomy 18:21-22), and this is just what had happened in regard to Jesus' pronouncements concerning his upcoming rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. Through the fulfillment of Jesus' personal prophecies he was vindicated as God's prophet predicted by Moses. In the Sermon on the Mount, he proclaimed his new law: "You have heard it said... but I say unto you" (Matt. 5:17-48). Jesus is Moses' final interpreter, predicted by and authorized with the authority of Moses himself. Moses never intended to give the final word on things - he reserved this right for the prophet to come.

The fullness of God's redemptive work has been displayed in Jesus! Jesus fulfills the promises given to the three most important people in Israel's history - the patriarch Abraham, Moses the lawgiver and nation-builder, and David the faithful king. In Jesus, the fullness of God's saving work is manifest. He fulfills and carries out all the promises and responsibilities of God's greatest leaders. There will be no one greater. The fullness of Jesus' glory will last "even to the end of the age."

Now we are in a position to see what makes the "Great Commission" great. In short, it is great because of who gives it (Jesus), when it is given (in the fullness of time as the final expression of God's saving work), and why it is given (to provide direction to the church).

Now that we are familiar with why the commission is "great" it is vital that we pay close attention to what is actually said in the Great Commission, for what is said must be of great importance!

The Reason: Jesus is King

The driving force behind the mission of the church is the fact that Jesus is king. Jesus' universal authority is the impetus, the driving force, behind the church's mission to the world. It is Christ's sovereignty over all that compels us to make disciples of all.

The comprehensiveness of His authority is demonstrated in the words Jesus speaks: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). Jesus possesses "all authority" in every sphere ("in heaven and earth"). No place is left out. He exercises unlimited sovereignty over all domains of reality. Jesus' statement is a direct allusion to Daniel's vision of the Son of Man approaching the Ancient of Days to receive a kingdom.

"I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations, and people of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus' universal reign is the basis for the universal claim of Christ's church. Since Jesus' kingdom is all-comprehensive our mission is also all-comprehensive. Notice Matthew's repetitive use of "all": Jesus has "all authority" over "all nations" and desires obedience to "all that I've commanded you" and will be with his church "always." The universal reign of Jesus is the ultimate truth of the cosmos. Since this reign is universal and ultimate, it is the true for everyone, everywhere, all the time.

We must get this truth straight in our minds. Without a clear conviction of Christ's sovereign rule over all we will not possess the necessary conviction to carry out his mission. Contrary to what some people believe - even some Christians - Jesus is not waiting passively in heaven as a prince waiting to be crowned. Instead, Jesus is already exercising his lordship over all creation. N. T. Wright writes,

Despite what many people today suppose, it is basic to the most elementary New Testament faith that Jesus is *already* ruling the whole world... People get very puzzled by the claim that Jesus is already ruling the world, until they see what is in fact being said. The claim is not that the world is already completely as Jesus intends it to be. The claim is that he is working to take it from where it was - under the rule not only of death but of corruption, greed and every kind of wickedness - and to bring it, by slow means and quick, under the rule of his life-giving love. (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*, p.206)

Other New Testament passages prove this to be true. Note the all-comprehensive and present authority of Jesus in the following passages:

For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death. (1 Corinthians 15:25-26)

These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:19b-23)

Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him. (1 Peter 3:22)

Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood (Revelation 1:5)

Although Jesus' universal claim to lordship is firmly established in Scripture, "[m]any today mock this claim just as much as they mock the resurrection itself" (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, p.206). Though the masses mock, reject, and disbelieve Jesus' claim, the church must not. The fulfillment of Jesus' mission hinges on our belief that his claim to universal and ultimate sovereignty is true.

Jesus is sovereignly reigning over heaven and earth and is presently bringing all things under the rule of his life-giving love. "And how is he doing this? Here is the shock: *through us, his followers.*" (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*, p.207). This is an awesome privilege and responsibility. We are called to be Jesus' faithful followers, obedient to his lordship. One of the chief manifestations of our submission to his authority is our faithfulness to his mission. Jesus' mission has already been stated: "I will build my church." Now we discover that Jesus will build his church through his church. In other words, Jesus will build his church through his disciples.

This is what Jesus is presently doing in the world. His mission will be accomplished by faithful obedient disciples who believe and submit to his authority in hope that this authority will be manifest to all the earth. "This... is part of the answer to the prayer that God's kingdom will come on earth as in heaven. If we pray that prayer, we shouldn't be surprised if we are called upon to help bring about God's answer to it" (N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part 2*, p.206).

For this reason we are called to "Go" (Matthew 28:19a). Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' instructions were to "go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:6; 15:4). Now these instructions are replaced by his universal mission to all ethnic groups - including Israel, but not limited to Israel by any means. This commission is given to all Jesus' people, not simply pastors or missionaries.

The Mission: "Make disciples"

The mission is simple: to be and make disciples. In order to make disciples we must first be disciples ourselves.

A disciple is a pupil, a student, a learner, a practitioner of his or her master's commands. A disciple seeks to learn wisdom from his or her teacher in order to imitate the teacher's way of life. The practice of steadfast obedience, faithful following, and radical commitment are all contained in the word "disciple."

To be a disciple is difficult and demanding. It involves discipline, self-regulation, and self-denial. It is a lifestyle, a way of life, a long obedience in the same direction. It calls for devotion and is practiced in community. It is not an easy, comfortable, convenient, or carefree life. It calls for uncompromising determination and complete devotion. Nevertheless, all the effort is worthwhile for it results in a closer relationship with God, a greater personal likeness to Christ, and a more loving relationship with others.

It is important to focus on the simplicity of the mission in order that we do not stray from it. There are many substitutes waiting to take the place of God's mission. They are appealing because they usually are less demanding and more easily measured.

The mission is not simply to "make converts" or "evoke decisions" or "provoke professions of faith." The call is to something more than this. Being a disciple involves conversion and transformation, numerous decisions for Christ made daily, and growing in one's understanding of one's profession of faith. When discipleship is made an optional accessory to the really important work of "making converts" then discipleship suffers, and thus, Jesus' mission suffers. It is much easier to get someone to fill out a card, walk an aisle, or raise their hand than it is to help them become a disciple. Filling out cards, walking aisles, and raising hands happens in an instant and involves minimal commitment; making disciples takes a lifetime and involves a lifelong commitment.

The mission is not reduced to the great evangelical passion for bodies, bucks, and buildings. Even though many evangelicals in theory decry using such items as measures of success, in practice these measurements are often the sole criteria used to evaluate effectiveness. Yet, what good is it to have large numbers, big money, the best programs, and the nicest facilities without a christlike community of growing disciples? None of these criteria prove this is really taking place. Simply drawing a crowd does not equal making disciples.

The mission is "to be and make disciples," for we must be disciples in order to make disciples. If we do not keep our focus on this, we will always choose the easier options of simple conversions or bigger buildings and more bodies and bucks. Our goal must be to create a community where spiritual formation into Christlikeness is paramount, taking precedence over all other things. How is this to be done? Jesus tells us. We distinguish ourselves as disciples through intimate identification with the triune God in baptism and we grow as disciples through faithful obedience to Christ's commands. In other words, discipleship is begun and sustained through baptism and teaching.

"Baptizing them." Baptism is an act of initiation into the body of Christ through intimate association with Jesus. Through baptism, we are marked out - branded - with God's holy name. We identify with all that God is, has, and represents. Like a bride we take upon ourselves God's name.

This act of identification points to a new relationship. It demonstrates that we are in union with God through Christ and by his Spirit. How often do you reflect on the significance of your baptism? You are a marked man or a marked woman! You have been intimately associated with God. You wear God's wedding band through baptism. Your new identity is found in participating in the life of God and his community.

"Teaching them." If Jesus has all authority, then his teachings are invested with divine authority. Discipleship involves a constant attention to Jesus' teachings in order to implement them in our lives. The purpose of teaching is clear: "to observe all I have commanded you." Teaching is intended to result in obedience. Teaching is not just brain-candy. We learn in order to increase our knowledge and demonstrate this through a transformed and transforming life. This continual process of transformation is to distinguish the community as God's people. Therefore, Christ's teaching must not merely be mentally grasped but put into practice. It must be appropriated by heart, mind, and will so that one can abide in the truth and thus prove to be Christ's disciple (John 8:31).

Discipleship is a life-long process and not just a one-time decision. The mission is not simply to get people to say the "sinner's prayer", walk an aisle, sign a card, or any other expression of a "one-time commitment." The mission is to bring people into a community of disciples in order that they may identify with God through baptism, entering a life of union with God issuing in obedience in all of life. This is not an activity that occurs apart from community but in the midst of a faithful community. Baptizing and teaching are both public activities. Thus, the church's major work is spiritual formation in the context of loving community. This mission is hard to achieve and sustain. Yet, we are not alone in this mission. After all, it is Jesus' mission.

The Promise: "I will be with you"

Jesus presence is found in the midst of his missional community. The final words of Jesus' commission promise this. The Greek "idou" translated as "lo" is an interjection frequently used to call attention to something of special importance. What is of special importance here: Jesus' promise, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age (lit. "all the days" perhaps emphasizing the daily nature of his supporting presence - 'day by day by day' - Douglas Hare, *Matthew*, p. 335). Jesus' promised presence applies to all his disciples; not just to the twelve, but to us as well.

The mission is simply stated, yet incredibly demanding: "to be and make disciples." This is what God wants! We are not in the dark about God's desire for his church. God wants this so much he has committed his transforming presence to this mission. He has made this mission the chief product of his saving work in Christ. God will measure our success not by bodies, bucks, and buildings, but by our faithfulness to his mission, both personally and as a community.

Will we create an environment that is devoted to being and making disciples? There are easier measures of success. There are other good things we could do. Making disciples is difficult, demanding, and draining. It is slow work that calls for great patience. It does not allow itself to be easily measured to ascertain effectiveness. It is sloppy, relational, and often unpredictable because of its personal nature. As simple as the mission is, it is terribly difficult to execute faithfully and continually.

Yet, if we want to know Christ's presence we will be involved in his mission. Christ has not promised his presence to just any mission. He has promised his presence to those who seek to fulfill his mission. "If many Christians have lost a sense of Jesus' presence and purpose among them, it may be because they have lost sight of the mission their Lord has given them" (Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, pp.720-721). We have no guarantee of Christ's presence if we won't obey his commission. Only a missional community can rest in the promise of Jesus' presence.

A Matter of Love

As important as the Great Commission is, we must never forget that Matthew does not explicitly label it as "great." There is only one thing that Matthew labels as great and that is the "Great Commandment" - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and first commandment. The second is like it, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40).

It is the Great Commandment that drives us to perform the Great Commission. This makes the execution of Jesus' mission a matter of love to God and love to others. Do we love the world enough? Do we love God enough? Ultimately, fulfilling God's mission of making disciples is an act of love to God and others. It is a priestly activity - a worshipful activity, a loving activity.

There is a legend that states that after the Ascension - when Jesus returned to heaven as the exalted and reigning Christ - some of the angels, archangels, and others of the heavenly host were curious about his earthly sojourn and questioned Him about His accomplishments. They asked, "Did you found a great movement? Did you have a great army? How many followers did you have?"

To which our Lord replied, "I generally attracted good crowds, but I only had twelve disciples and a few friends and dedicated followers." "Well," they said, "if there were so few they must have been exceptional human beings with sterling characters, persons who were leaders in their communities and successful in their careers."

To this Jesus replied, "Actually they were rather ordinary - a tax collector, several fishermen, just common working people." "Evidently they must have been a very loyal group," the others said. Jesus answered, "I believe they wanted to be loyal, but in my hour of crisis one betrayed me, another denied me, and almost all of them fled."

"And yet you expect this group to carry on your work?" they asked. "Yes, I do!" said Jesus. "Surely," they said, "you have some alternative plan." "No," said Jesus, "I have no alternative plan." "But you must have another group in reserve somewhere in the event this one fails," the angels said. To which Jesus replied, "I have no other group. This group is the only group in my Church."

There has to be another plan that is more efficient, more productive, and more effective. Yet, God has chosen to use us to fulfill his mission. Christ has committed and entrusted the ongoing work of his mission into our hands.

Perhaps it seems overwhelming to you at this point. Remember Jesus promises his presence to those who pursue his mission. Perhaps you are underwhelmed by whom Jesus would choose to use - ordinary folk like you and me. Welcome to God's upside-down way of doing things, using the foolish things of the world for his glory.

Perhaps you have listened too long to the voices of despair that surround us and pressure us to lose hope. "Don't bother. All is lost. No matter what you do you can't make a difference." The voices are wrong. Jesus is Lord. This will not change. The future is bright. The best days of God's church are not behind us, but ahead of us. Jesus' presence is here until the end - and then it gets better!

I urge you to commit to fulfilling Jesus' mission by participating in a spiritual community of Jesus' disciples who are committed to sharing life together on a common journey of faith, hope, and love. Only then can you be assured of Christ's personal presence empowering your life and ministry.

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