

MATTHEW'S MISSIOLOGY: MAKING DISCIPLES OF THE
NATIONS (MATTHEW 28:19-20)

Craig S. Keener

Matthew's Gospel closes with what Christians have often called the "Great Commission." This commission is no afterthought to Matthew's Gospel; rather, it summarizes much of the heart of his message. The earliest audiences of Matthew did not hear snippets of the Gospel extracted from pages in a modern book; they heard the entire Gospel read from a scroll. By the time Matthew's audience heard chapter 28, then, they would have heard his entire Gospel. They would thus recognize that Matt 28 was a fitting conclusion to Matthew's Gospel, weaving together themes that appear in that Gospel. As we examine elements of Matthew's closing, we must read it in light of the entire Gospel it is intended to climax.¹

Jesus' closing words in Matthew's Gospel include one imperative surrounded by three subordinate participial clauses—which is to say, one command that is carried out in three ways.² The one command is to make disciples of the nations, and this command is implemented by going, baptizing, and teaching. In modern church language, we might summarize these global discipleship tasks as cross-cultural ministry, evangelism, and Christian education. Because this commission

¹Much more briefly, I suggested some of these points in Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 715-21 passim; idem, *Matthew* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 400-2.

²The first participle ("going") may be part of the command ("make disciples"; Cleon Rogers, "The Great Commission," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 [1973]: 258-67), but Matthew does often coordinate this participle with the main verb (cf. 2:8; 11:4; 17:27; 28:7; Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* [NAC 22; Nashville: Broadman, 1992], 431). Even as an attendant circumstance participle, it remains an essential part of the commission (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 645).

climaxes Matthew's Gospel, we should read each of these functions in light of how they appear earlier in this Gospel.

1. Going to the Nations

Before commissioning his followers to disciple the nations, Jesus says, "going," often translated, "as you go." Because this word evokes Jesus' earlier command to his disciples to "go" in preaching the kingdom (10:5-7), we can be confident that it is no accident here. In the earlier passage, however, Jesus' disciples are to "go" only to Israel's lost sheep, and not to Gentile or Samaritan cities (10:5-6),³ whereas here, the object of "going" has changed. Jesus' followers are to make disciples of the "nations," so "going" demands crossing cultural barriers to reach the Gentiles.

Is cross-cultural ministry to Gentiles an idea that Matthew suddenly springs on his predominantly Jewish audience only at the end of his Gospel? Or is it an idea for which he has prepared them throughout his Gospel? Look first at Matthew's opening genealogy. Ancient Jewish genealogies typically included only male ancestors, but Matthew includes four women. Of the women he might have included, we might have expected him to include the most famous, the four matriarchs of Israel (or at least the three who were part of Jesus' royal lineage).⁴ Instead, Matthew includes four women who have some sort of association with Gentiles.⁵ Tamar (Gen 38) was a Canaanite;

³"Ways of Gentiles" probably meant roads leading to Gentile cities in or around Palestine (cf. T. W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979; London: SCM, 1957], 179; Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* [trans. S. H. Hooke; SBT 24; London: SCM, 1958], 19 n. 3). Samaria and Gentile territories surrounded Galilee; Jesus' instructions thus restricted their immediate mission to Galilee (see Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on his Literary and Theological Art* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 185).

⁴For the fame of the matriarchs, see e.g., *Jub.* 36:23-24; 1Qap Gen^{ar} 20.2-10; *Ab. R. Nat.* 26, §54B.

⁵With e.g., Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (trans. David E. Green; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 25; Bo Reicke, *The New Testament Era: The World of the Bible from 500 B.C. to A.D. 100* (trans. David E. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 118; F. F. Bruce, *The Message of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 65; Gundry, *Matthew*, 15; David Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 18. For early Jewish emphasis on their Gentile character, see e.g., Yair Zakowitch, "Rahab also Mutter des

ancient Jewish sources acknowledge her as a Gentile.⁶ Rahab was from Jericho; in fact, through a series of comparisons, Joshua's narrative contrasts this Gentile, who brought her family into Israel, with the Judahite Achan whose sin destroyed *his* family (Josh 2; 6–7).⁷ Ruth was from Moab; though Moabites officially were not permitted to enter Israel (Deut 23:3), God welcomed Ruth, who followed him (Ruth 1:16). "Uriah's widow" was probably from Judah herself, but is named by her deceased husband to reinforce her Gentile association: she was married to Uriah the Hittite. Thus, three ancestors of King David and the mother of King Solomon had some sort of association with Gentiles!

The normal purpose of Jewish genealogies was to emphasize the purity of one's Israelite (or sometimes levitical) ancestry.⁸ Matthew, by contrast, specifically highlights the mixed character of Jesus' royal lineage. Why would Matthew do this? This genealogy is important; the opening phrase, "book of the generation" (1:1), appears in Genesis with lists of descendants, but Matthew uses it instead for the list of Jesus' *ancestors*. Whereas people normally depend on their ancestors for their existence, Matthew understands that Jesus' ancestors depend on him for their purpose in history.⁹ Yet some of these ancestors were Gentiles. From the very start of his Gospel, Matthew shows that Gentiles were no afterthought in God's plan. From the beginning, God purposed to bless all the families of the earth in Abraham's seed!

In the very next chapter, those who come to "worship" the new king of the Jews are the Magi (2:1), Persian astrologers, who were

Boas in der Jesus-Genalogie (Matth. I 5)," *Novum Testamentum* 17 (1975): 1-5; Jeremias, *Promise*, 13-14; Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: with Special reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (2d ed.; SNTSMS 8; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1988), 167-70. Some commentators instead associate these women with sexual scandal, but the pattern does not fit Tamar, and miraculous matriarchal births would have better prepared for the virgin birth (1:18-25) than scandalous ones did.

⁶See e.g., *L.A.B.* 9:5; *T. Jud.* 10:6.

⁷E.g., Rahab hides spies on her roof; Achan hides loot beneath his tent; Rahab saves her family by betraying her people, whereas Achan destroys his family by betraying his people; and so forth (see J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 297-98).

⁸E.g., Josephus *Apion* 1.30; cf. b. Pes. 62b; p. Ter. 7:1; Johnson 1988: 88-95.

⁹Cf. Gundry, *Matthew*, 10, 13; Daniel Patte, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Structural Commentary on Matthew's Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 18.

supposed to honor especially the Persian king.¹⁰ Their role might shock Matthew's audience, who would expect Parthians to be polytheistic,¹¹ and who recognized the evil of pagan astrology.¹² What underlines the role of the Magi here even more firmly is the contrast with other main characters in the context.¹³ Whereas these likely pagans come to worship the true king (2:2), the current king over Judea, the Idumean Herod, acts like a pagan king. Matthew's audience is a few generations later than Herod and probably lies outside Jewish Palestine, so they might not know how many temples Herod built for pagan deities¹⁴ or his reputation for murdering members of his own

¹⁰Historically, officials did bring congratulations to other rulers (e.g., Josephus *War* 2.309; 4.498-501; Acts 25:13; Ludwig Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners Under the Early Empire* (4 vols.; trans. from the 7th rev. ed., Leonard A. Magnus, J. H. Freese, and A. B. Gough; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1907-1965), 1:211; Robert F. O'Toole, *Acts 26: The Christological Climax of Paul's Defense [Ac 22:1—26:36]* [AnBib 78; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978], 16-17); the Magi's visit to Jerusalem probably assumed that the new king was born in the palace (though Bethlehem is only about six miles away; *Student Map Manual: Historical Geography of the Bible Lands* [ed. J. Monson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan; Jerusalem: Pictorial Archive, 1979], 1-1).

¹¹See e.g., Josephus *Ant.* 18.348. Some may have been Zoroastrian, but evidence may be lacking that Zoroastrian religion was already as widespread as some scholars suppose (see Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, foreword Donald J. Wiseman [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996], 395-466; idem, "Did Persian Zoroastrianism Influence Judaism?" 282-97 in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?*, ed. Daniel I. Block, Bryan H. Cribb and Gregory S. Smith [Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2008], 291-92).

¹²E.g., *1 En.* 6:7, MSS; 8:3; *Jub.* 8:3; 12:17; 13:16-18; Philo *Praem.* 58; *Syr. Men. Sent.* 292-93; *Sib. Or.* 3:221-22, 227-29; *Sipra Qed.* pq.6.203.2.1; *Sipre Deut.* 171.4.1; still, astrology exerted a wide influence even in early Judaism (e.g., *Mek. Pisha* 2.44-46). Magi appear negatively in Dan 2:2, 10 LXX; more widely in Theodotian and Aquila; also Josephus *Ant.* 10.195-203.

¹³Ancient audiences were accustomed to comparing characters (on this practice, see e.g., Theon *Progymn.* 2.86-88; Hermog. *Progymn.* 8. On Synchrisis 18-20; Peter Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians* [WUNT 2, Reihe, 23; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987], 348-53; R. Dean Anderson, Jr., *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms Connected to Methods of Argumentation, Figures and Tropes from Anaximenes to Quintilian* [Leuven: Peeters, 2000], 110-11; Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 916-17, 1183-84).

¹⁴E.g., Josephus *Ant.* 14.76; 15.298; 16.147; 19.329, 359; *War* 2.266. His building projects and "benefactions" were not, however, limited to Palestine (e.g., *War* 1.422-28).

family.¹⁵ Any hearer of this passage, however, would recognize the analogy implied in his murder of Bethlehem's baby boys (2:16): Herod acted like Pharaoh of old (Ex 1:15-22).¹⁶ The Persian wise men honor Israel's true king, whereas the king of Israel acts like a pagan king!

Meanwhile, Herod's own wise men—chief priests and scribes (2:4)—know precisely where the Messiah will be born (2:5-6), yet make no effort to accompany the Magi.¹⁷ Those who knew God's word the best neglected its message—a sin that only Bible readers and teachers can commit. A generation later, their successors became Jesus' most lethal opposition (16:21; 20:18; 27:41). They stand in contrast to the Magi, who came from afar to worship Israel's rightful king, just as all Gentiles who become Jesus' followers do.

Gentiles continue to surface in Matthew's Gospel. In ch. 3, John reminds Jewish people that they cannot depend on their ancestry for salvation. Many believed that Abraham's descendants as a whole would be saved;¹⁸ John warns that God can raise up children for Abraham from stones (3:9).¹⁹ In ch. 4, Jesus relocates to Capernaum, fulfilling a prophecy of Isaiah about "Galilee of the Gentiles" (4:15). In ch. 8, Jesus delivers demoniacs from a largely Gentile region that raises pigs (8:28-34).²⁰ He also heals the servant of a centurion, and commends the centurion's faith as greater than that of his own fellow-Israelites (8:10). There Jesus notes that many of Abraham's genetic descendants would perish (8:12), but many would come from the east and west for the expected kingdom banquet with the patriarchs (8:11). Matthew has illustrated both directions: from the east, like Magi, and from the west, like Romans.²¹

¹⁵E.g., *Ant.* 16.394; 17.187, 191; *War* 1.443-44, 550-51, 664-65. For other atrocities or attempted atrocities, see e.g., *Ant.* 17.174-79; *War* 1.437, 659-60. The Herod of Matt 2 acts "in character" with what we know of him historically.

¹⁶Cf. another pagan king in 1 Macc 1:60-61; 2 Macc 6:10; 8:4.

¹⁷Historically, the Sanhedrin of Herod's day were his political lackeys, installed after he executed their predecessors (*Ant.* 14.175; 15.2, 5-6).

¹⁸See especially *m. Sanh.* 10:1.

¹⁹See more detailed discussion on the background in Keener, *Matthew* (1999), 124-25, and a forthcoming article on "human stones"; for John's preceding denunciation of the religious establishment as the offspring of vipers, see idem, "'Brood of Vipers' (Mt. 3.7; 12.34; 23.33)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28 (1, Sept. 2005): 3-11.

²⁰On Gadara's predominantly Gentile character, cf. e.g., Josephus *Ant.* 17.320; *War* 2.478.

²¹The centurion was probably geographically from the eastern empire, perhaps Syria (cf. Josephus *War* 2.267-68; G. H. Stevenson, "The Army and Navy,"

Soon afterward he also illustrates north and south: Sheba and Nineveh, which repented, will fare better at the judgment than his own generation of Israel, which has not (12:41-42).²² Indeed, he warns, even wicked Sodom will have a lighter judgment than his generation, for they would have repented had they seen the miracles his generation was seeing (10:15; 11:23-24).²³

Likewise, Jesus heeds the plea of a Canaanite woman (15:21-28). In Mark, she is a Syro-Phoenician “Greek”—that is, a resident of Syrophenicia who belongs to the ruling Greek class of urban citizens. She belongs to a class of people who have been exploiting the workers of the countryside, but now must come as a supplicant.²⁴ Matthew focuses instead on her location: she lives in a region populated by descendants of the ancient Canaanites.²⁵ Yet Matthew’s Gospel opened with mention of two Canaanite women of faith, and this Canaanite woman also becomes, like the Gentile centurion earlier, a model of faith (15:28).

It is likely no coincidence that Jesus puts the question about his identity to his disciples not in Jerusalem or Jewish Galilee but in Caesarea Philippi (16:13). Caesarea Philippi was a pagan city,

218-38 in *The Augustan Empire: 44 B.C.-A.D. 70*, vol. 10 in *The Cambridge Ancient History* [12 vols.; ed. S. A. Cook, F. E. Adcock and M. P. Charlesworth; Cambridge: University Press, 1966], 226-27; John Brian Campbell, “Legion,” 839-42 in *OCD*, 839), but he officially represents Rome.

²²The thought would be intelligible in an early Jewish setting. Some later rabbis suggested that Gentile converts would testify against the nations in the judgment (*Lev. Rab.* 2:9; *Pesiq. Rab.* 35:3), and some found in Nineveh’s quick repentance a threat to Israel (*Mek. Pisha* 1.81-82).

²³The prophets used Sodom to epitomize immorality (Is 13:19; Jer 50:40; Zeph 2:9) and applied the image to Israel (Deut 32:32; Isa 1:10; 3:9; Jer 23:14; Lam 4:6; Ezek 16:46-49). It continued to epitomize immorality in early Judaism (e.g., *Sir* 16:8; *Jub.* 36:10; 3 *Macc* 2:5; *t. Sanh.* 13:8; *Shab.* 7:23; *Sipra Behuq.* par. 2.264.1.3; *Sipre Deut.* 43.3.5).

²⁴See discussion in Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 70-72.

²⁵Some find some continuity with Canaanite culture in this period (R. A. Oden, Jr., “The Persistence of Canaanite Religion,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (1976): 31-36; David Flusser, “Paganism in Palestine,” 2:1065-1100 in *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and Institutions* [2 vols.; ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern with D. Flusser and W. C. van Unnik; vol. 1: Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp., B.V., 1974; Vol. 2: Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976], 1070-74).

originally named Paneas for its famous grotto of the god Pan.²⁶ By choosing such a setting, Jesus prefigured the future mission to proclaim his message outside the holy land. It is also undoubtedly no coincidence that the first people to acknowledge Jesus as God's son after the crucifixion are the Gentile execution squad (27:54).²⁷

Lest anyone miss the point of this recurrent theme of Gentiles, Matthew reports Jesus' one prerequisite for the end. In contrast to the expected end-time signs of his contemporaries (such as wars and famines),²⁸ of which Jesus says, "The end is not yet" (24:6-8), he announces that the good news about the kingdom will be proclaimed among all peoples, and "then the end will come" (24:14). The closing parable of this discourse probably reinforces that idea. In 25:31-46, the nations are judged by how they have received the messengers of the kingdom, the "least of these my siblings" (25:40, 45). Everywhere else in Matthew Jesus' spiritual siblings represent his disciples (12:49-50; 19:29; 23:8; 28:10); moreover, elsewhere in Matthew it is those who receive and give drink to Jesus' agents who do the same for him (10:40-42; cf. 10:11).²⁹ These texts involving proclamation to the nations before the end explains why 28:20 emphasizes that Jesus will be with us "until the end of the age": he will be with us in the task of discipling the nations (28:19).

²⁶See Pliny *N.H.* 5.15.71; Josephus *War* 1.404; further Josephus, *The Jewish War* (ed. Gaalya Cornfeld with Benjamin Mazar and Paul L. Maier; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 458; Vassilios Tzaferis, "Cults and Deities Worshipped at Caesarea Philippi-Banias," 190-201 in *Priests, Prophets and Scribes: Essays on the Formation and Heritage of Second Temple Judaism in Honour of Joseph Blenkinsopp* (ed. Eugene Ulrich et al., 1992); Vassilios Tzaferis and R. Avner, "Hpyrwt b'ny's," *Qadmoniot* 23 (3-4, 1990): 110-14.

²⁷Mark notes only the centurion (Mk 15:39); Matthew broadens this to his colleagues. The detachment for execution may have been as few as four (cf. Acts 12:4; Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *English Translation and Commentary* [vol. 4 in *The Beginnings of Christianity*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 134; Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.* 7.31).

²⁸Cf. e.g., *Jub.* 23:11-25 (esp. 23:13; 36:1); 1QM 15.1; *Sib. Or.* 3.213-15; 4 *Ezra* 8:63-9:8; 13:30; 2 *Bar.* 26:1-27:13; 69:3-5; *T. Mos.* 7—8; *m. Sot.* 9:15.

²⁹Historically most interpreters applied the passage specifically to believers (whether as the believing poor or, as more often today, to missionaries; for the history of interpretation, see Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25.31-46: A History of Interpretation* [SBLDS 114; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989]).

Many scholars think that Matthew wrote his Gospel after 70,³⁰ in the wake of massive Jewish suffering at the hands of the Gentiles. Those scholars who date Matthew before 70³¹ nevertheless date Matthew in a period where tensions were building toward that Judean revolt. Whenever we date Matthew's Gospel, then, he addressed an audience that had suffered at the hands of Gentiles and may have felt every reason to hate them. Yet Matthew's message summons them to cross all barriers to reach these very Gentiles who had been their enemies—even Canaanites and Roman officers. If Matthew could summon his first audience to sacrifice their own prejudice in such a way, his Gospel summons us to do no less. He summons us to surmount ethnic and cultural prejudice, to love and to serve others no matter what the cost. This is a message of ethnic reconciliation in Christ as well as a summons to global mission.

2. Baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

Baptism is an act of repentance, a response to a particular message (as in 3:2-6). For Matthew, the message now inviting baptism reveals the involvement of the triune God in God's kingdom, hence demands submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

a. Baptism in Matthew's Gospel

When Matthew's audience reaches ch. 28, they can think of the one water baptism already mentioned in Matthew's Gospel. This was John's baptism (3:6), meant to prepare for Jesus' greater baptism in the Holy Spirit (3:11). What did John's baptism signify?

Jewish people had many kinds of ceremonial washings, but the specific sort of baptism used once for a turning from an old way of life to a new one was applied to Gentiles converting to Judaism.³² As we

³⁰E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (5th rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 40; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Good News Commentary; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), xv; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (ICC; 3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1997), 1:127-38.

³¹E.g., Gundry, *Matthew*, 599-608; John A. T. Robinson, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 76-78.

³²For this background, see e.g., H. H. Rowley, "Jewish Proselyte Baptism and the Baptism of John," *HUCA* 15 (1940): 313-34; F. F. Bruce, *New Testament*

have already noted, John treats his Jewish hearers with respect to salvation like Gentiles: all must come to God on the same terms. Baptism was an act of turning to God, and in baptizing Israel for repentance John, like the prophets of old, was calling them to turn to God.

Baptism was a response to John's message; this was what differentiated it from other kinds of ceremonial washings. In emulating John's model in baptizing, we are evangelizing, proclaiming the message of the kingdom and repentance.

b. The Message of Father, Son, and Spirit

When John baptized, he was inviting people to embrace his message of repentance (3:6; cf. Mk 1:4) and the kingdom. That is, John was not administering an ordinary proselyte baptism, but was baptizing people with respect to a distinctive message. Matthew summarizes John's message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (3:2; cf. Mk 1:15); and also Jesus' message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 4:17). When Jesus sends the Twelve, he commands them to announce that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (10:7).

There is thus continuity in the central message of the kingdom, a continuity that suggests that Matthew expects this proclamation to remain his audience's message. For Jewish people, the good news of God's reign signified the restoration of God's people (Is 52:7), and that God would rule unchallenged. Most Palestinian Jews associated the coming of God's reign with the Davidic Messiah and the resurrection from the dead. But we who understand that the Messiah has both come and is yet to come, and that the resurrection has already been inaugurated in history, understand that God who will consummate his kingdom in the future has already inaugurated his reign through Jesus' first coming. Matthew balances seven parables of the future kingdom (Matt 24:32—25:46) with seven or eight parables of the present one (13:1-52).³³

Presumably, other aspects this passage associates with the kingdom message that are not revoked later in the Gospel also are expected to continue. Signs confirmed God's reign in Jesus' ministry

History (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1972), 156; I argue the case in some detail in Keener, *John*, 445-47.

³³With e.g., Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (2nd rev. ed.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 92-93.

(4:23-25); they also confirmed God's reign in the ministry of his disciples (10:8). In fact, in the context of Jesus' commission in ch. 10, he sends the disciples precisely to *multiply* his ministry of proclaiming and demonstrating the kingdom (9:35—10:1).³⁴ Since that objective certainly remains part of the Great Commission, we should expect that God will also provide signs of the kingdom as we work to make disciples of the nations today.³⁵ I do not suppose that all of us individually will encounter the same signs to the same degree, but we can expect God to confirm the true message of the kingdom that we proclaim (cf. Acts 14:3).

Despite the continuity in our message, however, since Jesus' resurrection we have a fuller kingdom message to proclaim. Jesus does imply the "kingdom" when he speaks of authority in 28:18, but now that heavenly authority has been delegated to him. The message of the kingdom is now not simply the message that "heaven" will reign, but more specifically, that the reigning God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (28:19). The Gospel already announced that Jesus had authority on earth to forgive sins (9:6), probably echoing the authority of the Son of Man in Dan 7:13-14. But now Jesus has all authority in *heaven* and on earth (28:18); the kingdom of *heaven* explicitly includes Jesus' reign.³⁶ (The Gospel emphasizes Jesus' authority repeatedly before climaxing at this point; see 7:29; 8:9; 9:8; 21:27, and his repeated authority over sickness, demons and nature.)

Moreover, Jesus' promise to be "with them" until the end of the age (28:20) was a divine promise. Judaism acknowledged only God as omnipresent; later rabbis called him *makom*, "the place," as a way of

³⁴See my further comment in Craig Keener, *Gift & Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 100-1; cf. idem, *The Spirit in the Gospels and Acts: Divine Purity and Power* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 110-17.

³⁵Besides my *Gift & Giver*, noted above, see more generally e.g., (among many others) John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986); Jack Deere, *Surprised by the Power of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); my forthcoming book on *Miracles* (Hendrickson).

³⁶Some Jewish texts employ "kingdom of heaven" as periphrasis for "God's kingdom" (*Sipra Qed.* pq. 9.207.2.13; *p. Kid.* 1:2, §24), though these seem particularly characteristic of Matthew. For "heaven" as a familiar Jewish periphrasis for "God," see e.g., Dan 4:26; 3 Macc. 4:21; *1 En.* 6:2; 1QM 12.5; Rom 1:18; Lk 15:18; *m. Ab.* 1:3; *t. B.K.* 7:5; *Sipra Behuq.* pq. 6. 267.2.1; 79.1.1.

emphasizing his omnipresence.³⁷ But Jesus is with all of us in carrying out his commission. This claim climaxes another motif in Matthew's Gospel, for the beginning scene announces Jesus as none other than "God with us" (1:23). Later, Jesus tells his disciples that where two or three are gathered in his name, there he is among them (18:20). This claim recalls a familiar Jewish principle: where two or three gathered to study God's Torah, his Shekinah, his presence, was among them.³⁸ Jesus is thus indicating that he is the very presence of God.

This rank and identity is most explicit in the baptismal message of 28:19 itself. John preached a baptism of repentance in light of the coming kingdom; we preach a baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Our baptism involves the reign of heaven, which we now understand in terms of the triune God. Jewish people regularly invoked God as Father;³⁹ they also recognized the Spirit as divine.⁴⁰ To place the "Son" between the Father and the Spirit was to claim nothing less than Jesus' deity. When a person is baptized, they should confess Jesus as Lord. When we preach the kingdom now, we can be specific who is king in the kingdom of God: Jesus Christ, as well as the Father and the Spirit.

The immediate context of 28:18-20 offers us another example of proclamation—in fact, both positive and negative models. In 28:1-10, the women are commissioned to take the message of Jesus' resurrection, and bear witness faithfully. They do so despite the prejudice against women's testimony throughout ancient Mediterranean

³⁷E.g., 3 *En.* 18:24; *m. Ab.* 2:9, 13; 3:14; *t. Peah* 1:4; 3:8; *Shab.* 7:22, 25; 13:5; *R.H.* 1:18; *Taan.* 2:13; *B.K.* 7:7; *Sanh.* 1:2; 13:1, 6; 14:3, 10; *Sipre Num.* 11.2.3; 11.3.1; 42/1/2; 42.2.3; 76.2.2; 78.1.1; 78.5.1; 80.1.1; 82.3.1; 84.1.1; 84.5.1; 85.3.1; 85.4.1; 85.5.1; *Sipra VDDen.* pq. 2.2.4.2; 4.6.4.1.

³⁸*M. Ab.* 3:2, 6; *Mek. Bahodesh* 11.48ff; cf. *m. Ber.* 7:3.

³⁹E.g., *Sir* 23:1, 4; 3 *Macc* 6:8; *m. Sot.* 9:15; *t. Ber.* 3:14; *B.K.* 7:6; *Hag.* 2:1; *Peah* 4:21; *Sipra Qed.* pq. 9.207.2.13; *Behuq.* pq. 8.269.2.15; *Sipre Deut.* 352.1.2.

⁴⁰In contrast to Christian theology, however, they viewed the Spirit as an aspect of God rather than a distinct divine person (cf. e.g., discussion in Keener, *John*, 961-66; idem, "Spirit, Holy Spirit, Advocate, Breath, Wind," 484-96 in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* [ed. Donald E. Gowan; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003], 484-87, 495-96). It is not impossible that baptism "in the name of the Holy Spirit" might relate somehow (perhaps symbolically) to baptism *in* the Spirit (Matt 3:11), but apart from noting the shared terms I have not yet tried to test this question exegetically.

culture.⁴¹ By contrast, in 28:11-15 the guards, because of fear and greed, bear false witness.⁴² These two models immediately precede the commissioning of the eleven to make disciples of the nations, a legacy the disciples imparted to those they discipled. That is, the women at the tomb offer the positive model for the church's message; the guards offer the antithesis of that model.⁴³

3. Teaching them to Obey all that Jesus Commanded

Discipleship from Matthew's perspective is not limited to evangelism; it includes training, so that we are also equipping those who will be our partners in evangelism. Perhaps the churches of Asia already understand this, but many churches in North America seem weak on both evangelism and training. At least in the United States, the church has lost much of its emphasis on teaching Scripture. Most things are driven by marketing; while marketing can be a useful tool, it is not a criterion of truth or morality. Some messages are more popular than others because they are more marketable to consumers. Many churches across the theological spectrum succumb to the culture's values, whether its sexual mores or its materialism; many churches fight for their tradition, or focus on charismatic speakers' experiences. Yet most of the western church today neglects the very Scriptures that we claim to be our arbiter of truth and a living expression of God's voice. Syncretism with the spiritual values of the world, such as the worship of mammon alongside God, has weakened much of the church in my nation. What the church calls "missions" is not just about evangelism, but also about training disciples who can partner in the task of evangelism. It must involve *multiplying* the work by trusting

⁴¹See e.g., Josephus *Ant.* 4.219; *m. Yeb.* 15:1, 8-10; 16:7; *Ket.* 1:6-9; *t. Yeb.* 14:10; *Sipra VDDeho.* pq. 7.45.1.1; Hesiod *W.D.* 375; Livy 6.34.6-7; Babrius 16.10; Phaedrus 4.15; Avianus *Fables* 15-16; Justinian *Inst.* 2.10.6 (though contrast the earlier Gaius *Inst.* 2.105); Plutarch *Publicola* 8.4; cf. Lk 24:11; Craig Keener, *Paul, Women & Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 162-63.

⁴²Their fear and greed evoke the failures of Peter (who denied Jesus from fear, 26:70-75) and Judas (who betrayed Jesus from greed, 26:15-16; on the narrative contrasts with Judas in that context, see Keener, *Matthew* [1999], 617, 620).

⁴³Keener, *Matthew* (1999), 699, 715.

the Holy Spirit and Christ's teaching to multiply equally committed laborers for the harvest.⁴⁴

When Jesus speaks of "teaching them to obey everything I commanded you" (28:20), Matthew's audience will think of Jesus' commands that they have already been hearing earlier in his Gospel. Many of these teachings are arranged in five major discourse sections,⁴⁵ each ending with the phrase, "when Jesus had finished these sayings" (or "parables"; 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1).⁴⁶ These discourses address the ethics of the kingdom (chs. 5–7), the proclamation of the kingdom (ch. 10), parables involving the presence of the kingdom (ch. 13), relationships in the kingdom (ch. 18), and the future of the kingdom from the standpoint of Jesus' first disciples (chs. 23–25). The last section includes woes against the religious establishment of Jesus' day, as well as the destruction of the temple and judgment on the generation that rejected Jesus. Yet it also looks ahead to judgment on the generation of his second coming, when some of his servants might prove as oblivious to his demands as was the religious establishment at his first coming (e.g., 24:45-51; 25:14-30).

Matthew's audience might thus well think of all of Jesus' teachings in this Gospel. Nevertheless, I will focus here specifically on several of Jesus' teachings that directly involve the cost of discipleship.⁴⁷ Those who are to "make disciples" of the nations must understand what discipleship involves. In the kingdom, as opposed to contemporary models of Jesus' day, Jesus' followers are not to make disciples for themselves, but only for Jesus, the only true "Rabbi" (23:8).⁴⁸

⁴⁴See e.g., the biblical strategy in Melvin L. Hodges, *The Indigenous Church* (Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1976).

⁴⁵Some have followed Papias in comparing the five sections with the Pentateuch (Bruce, *Documents*, 41; idem, *Message*, 62-63; Peter F. Ellis, *Matthew: his mind and his message* [Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1974], 10; Samuel Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978], 51), but most who recognize five sections fail to find this correspondence (Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:61; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew* [2 vols.; WBC 33AB; Dallas: Word, 1993-1995], 1:li).

⁴⁶Such phrases offered a natural way to close a section; see e.g., Ex 34:33; *Jub.* 32:20; 50:13; Dale C. Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 192-93 compares Deut 31:1, 24; 32:45

⁴⁷For the phrase, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (rev. ed.; New York: Macmillan; London: SCM, 1963).

⁴⁸In Jesus' day, probably an honorary greeting meaning, "my master" (23:7-8). Likewise, "father" (23:9), while a greeting applicable to all elders, was

Jesus' calling of disciples in 4:19-20 shows that true disciples must value Jesus above job security. The disciples left their nets to follow Jesus. While ordinary fishermen were not among the elite, they were probably also better off than the majority of people who were peasant farmers.⁴⁹ At least some of them, like Peter, already were married (8:14), hence had families to support (since wives could earn few wages in that culture).⁵⁰ To forsake their livelihoods for ministry was a serious act of faith.⁵¹

Further, true disciples must value Jesus above residential security. Seeing Jesus about to cross the lake, a prospective disciple offers to follow him "wherever" he goes (8:18-19)—perhaps implying, "even across this lake."⁵² Jesus invites him to count the cost of real following: despite a home in Capernaum (4:13), Jesus' itinerant ministry in a sense left him no place to rest (8:20),⁵³ except maybe on a boat during a storm (8:24).⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Matthew shows that even as

particularly applicable to teachers (2 Kgs 2:12; 4 Bar. 2:4, 6, 8; 5:5; *t. Sanh.* 7:9; *Sipre Deut.* 34.3.1-3, 5; 305.3.4).

⁴⁹With Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 241; cf. John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem as Jesus Knew It: Archaeology as Evidence* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), 29-30; Martin Hengel, *Property and Riches in the Early Church: Aspects of Social History of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 27.

⁵⁰For women's status in some ancient Mediterranean societies, see e.g., discussion in Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken, 1975); Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law & Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986); Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996); Craig Keener, "Marriage," 680-93 in *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 687-90; idem, *Paul, Women & Wives*, passim.

⁵¹Accounts of people forsaking everything to convert to Judaism (*Sipre Num.* 115.5.7) or philosophy (Diogenes Laertius 6.5.87; Diogenes *Ep.* 38) underlined the value of what the converts were acquiring (cf. Matt 13:44-46).

⁵²For the contextual connection, see Jack Dean Kingsbury, "On Following Jesus: the 'Eager' Scribe and the 'Reluctant' Disciple (Matthew 8.18-22)," *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 45-59, here 56.

⁵³His comparison with birds (cf. Ps 11:1; 84:3; 102:6-7; 124:7; Prov 27:8; at Qumran, cf. Otto Betz, *What Do We Know About Jesus?* [Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1968], 72) and foxes (Lam 5:18; Ezek 13:4) is apt, since they lacked much residential security; he lacked more.

⁵⁴It might be noteworthy that Matthew omits the makeshift cushion in Mk 4:38.

an infant, Jesus was a refugee (2:13-15). Those who follow him have no certain home in this world.

True disciples must also value Jesus above financial security. Jesus admonished a rich young man who wanted eternal life to give everything he had to the poor (19:21). Radical teachers in antiquity sometimes tested would-be disciples, including rich ones, to see if they could count the cost.⁵⁵ But the principle in Jesus' demand extends beyond this particular rich man; Jesus summons all his disciples to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth (6:19-21),⁵⁶ and to concern themselves with the affairs of the kingdom rather than with the source of their food or drink (6:24-34).

True disciples must further value Jesus above social obligations. Wishing to defer discipleship, one prospective disciple wants to first bury his father; Jesus invites him instead to follow, leaving the burial to others who are dead (8:21-22). In Jesus' day, the son would have gone home immediately on hearing of the father's death, and would not likely have been talking with Jesus, so the son is likely asking for one of two things. One possibility is that he is asking for as much as a *year's* delay; after the completion of the initial burial and seven days of mourning,⁵⁷ the son would need to remain available for the secondary burial a year later.⁵⁸ The other possibility is that the son is asking for an *indefinite* delay: in a related Middle Eastern idiom, one can speak of fulfilling one's final filial obligation with reference to the father's *future* death—thus the father might not even be dead yet.⁵⁹

Whichever of these approaches is more likely, we should not think that they significantly reduce the social scandal of Jesus' demand. Burying a father was one of a son's greatest social responsibilities. Many Jewish sages in fact considered honoring parents a son's greatest

⁵⁵E.g., Diogenes Laertius 6.2.36, 75-76; 6.5.87; 7.1.22; cf. Aulus Gellius 19.1.7-10. Such teachers intended these challenges as tests, not absolute rejection; they normally accepted as disciples those who agreed to their demands (Diogenes Laertius 6.2.21; Diogenes *Ep.* 38; cf. *Sipre Num.* 115.5.7).

⁵⁶Jesus adapted widely used language and imagery here (e.g., Sir 29:10-11; 4 *Ezra* 7:77; 2 *Bar.* 14:12; 24:1; 44:14; *t. Peah* 4:18).

⁵⁷Cf. Sir 22:12; Jdt 16:24; S. Safrai, "Home and Family," 728-92 in *Jewish People in the First Century*, 782.

⁵⁸See Byron R. McCane, "'Let the Dead Bury Their Own Dead': Secondary Burial and Matt 8:21-22," *Harvard Theological Review* 83 (1990): 31-43.

⁵⁹Kenneth Ewing Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes: More Lucan Parables, Their Culture and Style* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 26.

responsibility,⁶⁰ and burying them was perhaps the greatest expression of that responsibility.⁶¹ Only God himself could take precedence over parents in such a matter!⁶² A son who failed to fulfill this task would be ostracized in his home village for the rest of his life. The call to follow Jesus, who is “God with us” (1:23), takes priority over social obligations and honor.

Yet all of these demands for discipleship pale in comparison to the ultimate demand Jesus places on prospective disciples. Those who want to be his disciples must take up their cross and follow him—i.e., to the cross (16:24). In Jesus’ day, when people spoke of going to the cross they normally meant being led to execution, often through a hostile mob.⁶³ Jesus demands nothing less than his followers’ lives.

While there may be an element of hyperbole in some of Jesus’ teachings,⁶⁴ the point of hyperbole is not so that hearers will dismiss it lightly as “simply hyperbole,” as it is sometimes portrayed today. The point of hyperbole is to challenge hearers. Nevertheless, while Jesus’ standard is an absolute one, it is implemented with grace, as Matthew’s narratives reveal. Jesus warned that a true disciple must follow him to the cross; his first disciples, however, abandoned him and fled (26:56). Their failure left the Romans to draft a bystander, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the cross that Jesus’ disciples failed to carry for him (27:32).⁶⁵

⁶⁰*Let. Arist.* 228; Josephus *Apion* 2.206; Ps.-Phoc. 8; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era* (2 vols.; New York: Schocken, 1971), 2:132.

⁶¹E.g., Tob 4:3-4; 6:14; 1 Macc 2:70; 4 Macc 16:11. Failure to bury a father was offensive throughout Mediterranean antiquity (e.g., Demosth. *Against Aristogeiton* 54).

⁶²Deut 13:6; 4 Macc 2:10-12; Josephus *Apion* 2.206; Ps.-Phoc. 8; *b. Meg.* 3b. Some teachers claimed priority over parents (e.g., *m. B.M.* 2:11; cf. Diodorus Siculus 10.3.4), but not to the extent of damaging funeral arrangements!

⁶³Jeremias, *Parables*, 218-19; idem, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), 242.

⁶⁴A common ancient pedagogic device (e.g., *Rhet. Her.* 4.33.44; Cicero *Orator* 40.139; Philostratus *V.A.* 8.7; *Hrk.* 48.11; R. Dean Anderson, Jr., *Glossary of Greek Rhetorical Terms Connected to Methods of Argumentation, Figures and Tropes from Anaximenes to Quintilian* [Leuven: Peeters, 2000], 122-24; Galen O. Rowe, “Style,” 121-57 in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period 330 B.C.-A.D. 400* [ed. Stanley E. Porter; Leiden: Brill, 1997], 128).

⁶⁵Keener, *Matthew* (1999), 676. On Simon of Cyrene, see e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 913.

Yet Jesus never repudiated his disciples. Instead, he patiently formed them into what he had called them to be. Jesus knows what we are made of, but *he* can make us what he has called us to be.

Conclusion

Matthew 28:19-20 pulls together some major themes that run through the rest of the Gospel. Its one command, making disciples of the nations, involves three elements found in subordinate participial clauses: going, baptizing, and teaching. Each of the themes implied in these phrases appears throughout the Gospel. Matthew repeatedly emphasizes the role of Gentiles (1:3-6; 2:1-2; 8:10-12; 15:21-28; 24:14; 27:54; cf. 3:9; 4:15; 8:28; 10:15; 11:23-24; 12:41-42; 16:13; 25:32), hence cross-cultural concern. John's baptism involved the message of the kingdom (3:2; cf. 4:17; 10:7), but the Gospel climaxes by declaring that a baptism the message of which reveals the fullness of God that Christian tradition calls the Trinity.⁶⁶ Jesus is king in God's kingdom; he has all authority (28:18), is linked with the Father and Spirit (28:19), and is "with" his people (28:20; as "God with us, 1:23; 18:20). The women and the guards provide contrasting models for announcing Jesus' message (28:1-15). Finally, the Gospel is replete with Jesus' teachings, including not only five discourse sections but also other specific teachings on the cost of discipleship relevant to the new mission (e.g., 4:19-20; 8:20, 22; 16:24; 19:21).

This survey offers implications for the church's missionary task. The Great Commission is not an idea tacked inelegantly to the end of Matthew's Gospel, as if Matthew had nowhere else to put it. Rather, it summarizes the heart of this Gospel's message. The question it presents to us as believers today is whether we will devote our lives to what Christ has commanded us. Each of us has different gifts and callings, but we must organize those gifts around this central task. Like a nation devoted to some all-consuming war, we must engage in total mobilization, mobilizing all of our resources for this mission. Our conflict, though, is a spiritual one, not with flesh and blood, and it

⁶⁶The term may stem from the late second-century North African theologian Tertullian (see e.g., R. L. Richard, "Trinity, Holy," 14:293-306 in *New Catholic Encyclopedia* [17 vols.; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1967], 297), but the idea is already present early in the New Testament (see e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994], 839-42).

invites us to devote all that we are and have to mobilize the church to fulfill Christ's mission. Never before have the stakes been so great. Some estimate that the world's population was one billion by 1830, and two billion by 1930; today it is close to seven billion. God's power will be commensurate with the task he gives us. Are we ready?

Matthew 28:19-20. 19 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, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age. Read more. Share. Mat 28:19 - Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Tools. Mat 28:20. Mat 28:20 - and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Interlinear Bibles Cross-Refs Commentaries Dictionaries Misc. Interlinear Bibles Cross-References Commentaries Dictionaries Misc. Close Tools. † Prior Chapter Next Chapter †. † Prior Book Next Book †.