

AN EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW 28:19-20

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CORE ISSUES FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP IN  
GLOBAL MINISTRY OUTREACH

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## AN EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW 28:19-20

The purpose of this research paper is to explore Matthew 28:16-20 with regard to its relevance for the Church in the Twenty-First Century. Is it Biblically appropriate to consider this popular missions' passage as a mandate for the Church today? Are the presentations made by countless missionary speakers espousing this passage as the marching orders of the Lord incorrect? The number of appeals based upon Matthew 28:19-20 of course does not guarantee that it is biblically correct to do so. If it is erroneous to espouse this passage as the Church's mandate for missions ample biblical data should exist to demonstrate the inappropriateness of using it as such.

The thesis of this research paper more precisely will be to answer the question, "where does Matthew 28:19-20 fit in global ministry?" There are three major parts, namely, a textual analysis of the passage including an introductory examination of the book of Matthew, a comparison of the various views being expressed today on this passage (included in this part will be the recorded views of some of the early writers in the Church), and lastly, providing an answer to the question regarding the relevance of Matthew 28:19-20 to the mission of the Church in the world today.

### **A Textual Analysis of Matthew 28:16-20**

Listed below is a sampling of some of the renderings of Matthew 28:19-20 taken from different Bible versions:

Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

American Standard Version, 1901

Go then, and make disciples of all the nations, giving them baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to keep all the rules which I have given you: and see, I am ever with you, even to the end of the world.

1965 Bible In Basic English

”You, then, go and make disciples of all the nations and baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you and, remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English (Revised Second Edition)

The general makeup of this research paper will be first to provide a textual analysis of the passage. This analysis involves an examination of the broader context, namely the Gospel of Matthew in

its entirety. Such questions as theme, audience, purpose, and date will be addressed. The study will then focus on the textual analysis and interpretation of Matthew 28:19-10. What did Matthew have in mind when he penned this passage? If it is not applicable for today when and how has it been fulfilled? If it is for today in what way is the Church to carry out its marching orders from the Lord? Is it a missions mandate and model for the Church to implement until Christ returns to take it out of a world intensifying in evil? Is the “great commission” a “kingdom building” tool for the Church to utilize in making the world a “heaven on earth” to be given to Christ when He returns? Is it a mandate to establish a “spiritual kingdom” (in the hearts of men) instead of a literal one? Whatever a serious Bible student’s conclusion, a proper analysis of Matthew 28:19-20 must successfully maneuver through the grid of sound exegesis as a result of a biblically consistent hermeneutic properly applied.

The examination and analysis of the Biblical text will be followed by a section which will seek to compare and examine some of the major views existing in the Christian community related to Matthew 28:19-20. Which of the views are more Scripturally consistent? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these views when stacked up against Biblical data?

#### The Date of Matthew

This question is particularly relevant to the text under consideration. The earliest documents referring to the Gospel of Matthew are the epistles of Ignatius which are dated at 110 to 115 AD.<sup>1</sup> The dating of Matthew ranges from the fifties to the middle sixties. Some apparent markers should be noted which may help sharpen the focus on a more precise date. There is no detailed reference to the destruction of Jerusalem for instance. This destruction occurred in 70 AD. In His Second Coming discourse, recorded in Matthew 24, Jesus predicted this event. It was obviously still future when Jesus addressed it in

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<sup>1</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 19.

Matthew 24:2, "...a]mh>n le<gw u[mi?n, ou] mh> a]feq^? w\$de li<qoj e]pi> li<qon o!j ou] kataluqh<setai."

Even though the word for church (e]kklhsi<a) is used on two occasions in Matthew, namely Matthew 16:18 and Matthew 18:17 the only clear reference is in the simple future in Matthew 16:18

( "oi]kodomh<sw mou th>n e]kklhsi<an"). D.A. Carson comments regarding this particular prediction of the Church that there is "...nothing about the details of order (e.g. elders or deacons are not mentioned) but only of broad principles appropriate to the earliest stages of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> I would submit, however, that of course there are no details because the theme, purpose, as well as the identity of the addressees militate against their inclusion. Craig Bloomberg comments that "...perhaps a very slight preponderance of weight favors a date from c. 58-69. It may be fairly safe to postulate that Matthew was written in the sixties and therefore some thirty years or more after our Lord's death on the cross and the beginning of the Church as recorded in Acts 2.

### The Addressees

It is obvious to even the casual reader of the Gospel of Matthew that the targeted audience are Jews. Matthew does not address his gospel but the internal indicators provide the reader with a strong suggestion that the book is directed primarily to a Jewish audience. It is noteworthy however to mention the unusual inclusion of women in Matthew's genealogy along with the amazing fact that each (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba) were Gentiles. The word translated "Gentiles" is mentioned ten times in the Gospel of Matthew. Particularly in the sermon on the mount the references to Gentiles are negative as if to classify them as heathen or pagan (compare Matthew 5:47; 6:7, 32). The numerous Old Testament references cited in Matthew assumes a thorough going familiarity with the sacred Scriptures on the part of the readers (e.g. Matthew 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 5:18; 8:17; 12:17; 13:14, 35; 21:4; 26:4,26; 27:9, 35).

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<sup>2</sup>. D.A. Carson, "Matthew" in EBC, 20.

From the genealogical connection of David and Abraham to the exclusive nature of the commission recorded in Matthew 10 to the climatic pronouncement of judgment by our Lord in Matthew 23:37-39 the intended recipients of Matthew's message are Jews.

Blomberg cites Irenaeus and Eusebius postulating that Matthew wrote to the Hebrews. He qualified his reference to Jerome stating that he may have been referring to the "Gospel of Hebrews" instead.<sup>3</sup>

D.A. Carson states that "most scholars take Antioch as the place of composition. Antioch was a Greek speaking city with a substantial Jewish population..."<sup>45</sup>

#### The Theme of Matthew

The person of Jesus Christ is presented as the legitimate Messiah of the nation of Israel. Matthew records His message and His program as well as its presentation to the nation of Israel. From the beginning Jesus is presented as the Messiah predicted in the Old Testament Scriptures. The genealogy places an emphasis on the Davidic and Abrahamic covenant by stressing the name of David as well as Abraham at the very beginning of the Gospel (compare Matthew 1:1, 17). David's name placed before the name of Abraham draws attention to the importance of the Davidic covenant and its fulfillment in the person of Jesus, the Christ. Throughout Matthew a strong connection is maintained between the Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment in the coming of Jesus Christ as the true Messiah of Israel. The following is just a sampling of the relevant Scriptures said to be fulfilled in the coming of the Christ: Matthew 1:23 is a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 2:15 is a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1; Matthew 2:17 is a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15; Matthew 2:28 is a fulfillment of Isaiah 53:3 and Psalm 22:6 as

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<sup>3</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 36.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, "Matthew" in EBC, 21.

<sup>5</sup> D.A. Carson, "Matthew," 21.

suggested by Charles Ryrie in his study Bible; Matthew 13:14-15 is a fulfillment of Isaiah 6:9, 10 and Psalm 78:2; Matthew 27:9-10 is a fulfillment of Zechariah 11:12,13 and Jeremiah 9:1-13; 32:6-9. There is a strong dispensational element present in the book of Matthew. As was mentioned previously the only reference to the Church is future, namely Matthew 16:18. The message of John, the Baptist, as well as that of our Lord was to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2; 4:17).” The kingdom theme in Matthew should be interpreted in the light of a very literal presentation of the theocratic kingdom detailed in the Old Testament. Dr. Alva J. McClain claimed that it was a major theme of the Old Testament. The Scripture text provided to Herod by the Magi in Matthew 2:6 from Micah 5:2 was in reference to a future kingdom promised time and time again through the prophets. It is obvious from the text in Matthew that both those who quoted from Micah as well as those who heard the quotation anticipated a literal fulfillment.

In Matthew the kingdom promised to Israel in the Old Testament was offered to the nation of Israel. It is clear from the gospel that this offer made to the nation was in earnest. The commission to the twelve disciples in Matthew 10 is discriminating. The instructions are clear, “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The genuine offer of the Messianic kingdom to Israel was rejected by the nation. This rejection by the nation of Israel looming over the horizon is intimated in Matthew 11:13-19. The climatic point was reached in Matthew twelve with the ultimate charge of blasphemy laid at the feet of our Lord by the representative religious leadership of the nation, namely, the Pharisees. The words of our Lord recorded in Matthew 12:34 are pregnant with judgment, “Ye offspring of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (American Standard, 1901).

From this point on the hostility displayed particularly by the spiritual leaders of Israel to the proclamation and program of the Kingdom and its King only intensify in Matthew’s Gospel.

The parables of Matthew thirteen set forth the kingdom in mystery form. In other words, Jesus described the conditions which would prevail between the time of His first coming and the time of His

second coming. The “mystery” aspect was due to the fact that the nation (the religious leaders were representatives of the entire nation) was missing this most important point. A bonafide offer of the kingdom by the King. As Jesus said in Matthew 13:13, “Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” McClain states that the passage quoted in Matthew 13:13-15, namely Isaiah 6:9-10, “is referred to five times in the New Testament in connection with Israel’s rejection of her King (Matt. 13:13-15; Mark 4:11-12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40; Acts 28:25-27.)”<sup>6</sup> The characteristic phrase, “the kingdom of heaven is likened” is used to introduce great spiritual themes of the interval period.

Starting in Matthew 16:21 Jesus began to let His disciples in on the details which would surround His death and resurrection. He reminded them again in Matthew 17:22-23 and again in Matthew 20:18-19. The rejection of the King and His program for Israel is woven throughout the teachings of Christ. One particular parable which so clearly demonstrates this presentation and rejection is Matthew 20:33-46. Evidently the religious leaders understood perfectly well what Jesus was communicating in this parable and resulting application. Their response was to once again attempt to take Jesus by force but their political sense prevented it at the time (Matthew 13:45-46, “And when the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they perceived that he spake of them. And when they sought to lay hold on him, they feared the multitudes, because they took him for a prophet” - American Standard Version, 1901).

Matthew 23 is significant in that it is the pronouncement of judgment upon the nation of Israel by her God. The crescendo of the passage is Matthew 23:37-39. In Matthew 24 Jesus described, in response to the disciples’ inquiry, the worst time of judgment coming to this planet ever, namely, the Great Tribulation. Jesus laid the responsibility and its consequences squarely at the feet of Israel. He did so with these words, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not

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<sup>6</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1974).

see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:37-39 in the American Standard Version, 1901). The Olivet Discourse presented in Matthew 24 is the promise of judgment, namely, “Jacob’s Troubles” (Jeremiah 30:7), predicted in Daniel 9; Isaiah 34; Jeremiah 30:7, and countless other Old Testament references. The “bull’s eye” for this awful time of wrath coming to the earth will be the city of Jerusalem.

With the rejection of the bonafide offer made to Israel a different and new program is introduced. Its presentation is broadened to include all nations beginning at Jerusalem. The program came to be known as the Church. What is referred to as the “great commission” was given on three different occasions during the post resurrection appearances of our Lord. The chronological setting for the giving of the “great commission” is significant if it is to be established as the Church’s mandate for global evangelism. The first occurrence of the giving of the Great Commission was to the disciples on the eve of the resurrection Sunday. Thomas was absent from the scene. This event is recorded in two different passages, one can be found in John 20:19-24. This shortest of the commission is as follows, “Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Spirit: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.” On this first occasion the commission was given was in a room in Jerusalem.

The second occurrence of the giving of the commission is the context of the Scripture passage under consideration in this paper, namely, Matthew 28:19-10. Dwight Pentecost includes Mark 16:15-18 as a reference to the same occasion.<sup>7</sup> Mark’s account reads as follows, “ And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned” (American Standard Version, 1901). A.T. Robertson parallels Matthew 28:16-20 with Mark 16:15-18 as well as First Corinthians 15:6. If Robertson is right

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<sup>7</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Harmony of the Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 166.

the number in the assembly on the mountain in Galilee would total five hundred people.<sup>8</sup> D.A. Carson however asserts that “there is no close Gospel parallel to these verses.”<sup>9</sup> This commission was given on a mountain in Galilee.

The third and last occasion of the giving of the “great commission” is in Luke 24:44-49, “And he said unto them, Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Ye are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send forth the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city, until ye be clothed with power from on high. And he led them out until *they were* over against Bethany: and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven” (American Standard Version, 1901).

In an article entitled, “What is the Church’s Commission?” Robert D. Culver lists the addressee question as a “minor problem.” In the article he quoted J.P. Lange’s assertion that the phrase, “some doubted,” could not apply to the “eleven.” Lange postulated that this is referring to the many witnesses reported in First Corinthians 15:6 (“five hundred brethren at once”). Culver observed that Lenski, a Lutheran writer, concurs.

H.A.W. Meyer differed believing that the addressees refer only to the eleven. The “doubting is understood in a pluperfect sense - i.e. Thomas.”

Robert Culver’s conclusion? “As many observe, however, only in Galilee would 500 Christian believers be found at this date, and there is, therefore, every likelihood that this is the occasion referred to

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<sup>8</sup> A.T. Robertson, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1950), 240.

<sup>9</sup> D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in EBC, 591.

by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:6. The importance is that if all Christian believers who could come were there it is much easier to accept this as the church's commission and not merely the apostles' commission."<sup>10</sup>

An observation about the implications regarding Jesus' audience is addressed by George W. Peters in an article written back in the sixties. He commented, "we have no doubt that the commission was first addressed to the apostles. The question presses upon us as to who does inherit the mantle of the apostles, the church, or the individual Christian? Too frequently the words are being addressed only to individuals as Christ's special challenge to missions. While they have such force and implication the fact remains that it is the church's responsibility to baptize and teach. This is evident from the practice and teaching of Paul...thus the great commission falls principally upon the church. The church inherits the great commission from the Apostles of Christ and becomes responsible for its realization."<sup>11</sup>

The following common characteristics can be gleaned from an observation of the three separate commissions:

- (1) The commission is directed to the disciples.. They are the ones held accountable for the delivery of the message
- (2) Assistance is promised from the Holy Spirit
- (3) The message to be delivered is the death and resurrection of our Lord for the remission of sins
- (4) The authority of Christ is ever assumed or stated explicitly
- (5) A geographical beginning marker is indicated, namely, Jerusalem (compare also Acts 1:8)

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<sup>10</sup> Robert D. Culver, "What is the Church's Commission?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2 CD 125 (July 1968): 240, CD.

<sup>11</sup> George W. Peters, "The Church in Missions" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2 (1968), CD.

## The Immediate Context

The Greek text is as follows:

πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα  
 τῷ Πατρὶ καὶ τῷ υἱῷ καὶ τῷ ἁγίῳ πνεύματι, διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν  
 πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην ὑμῖν· καὶ ἴδου ἐγὼ μεθ' ὑμῶν εἶμι πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας ἕως ἁῶνος  
 συντελείας τῷ Πατρὶ ἀΐωνος·

The only critical comment about the text is from Bruce Metzger who stated that “after αἰωνος most manuscripts, followed by the Textus Receptus, terminate the Gospel with ἀμην, reflecting the liturgical usage of the text. If the word had been present originally, no good reason can be found to account for its absence from the better representatives of the Alexandrian, the Western, and the Caesarean text-types.”<sup>12</sup>

Concerning the genre of the text Carson writes, “the most believable opinion is that of Hubbard, who avoids the classifications of his predecessors (enthronement hymn, official decree, covenant renewal manifesto) and opts for a commissioning narrative patterned after similar OT commissionings (e.g., Gen 12:1-4; Exod 3:1-10; Josh 1:1-11; Isa 6; 49:1-6). He finally concludes that “it seems best to conclude with John P. Meier...that this pericope does not easily fit any known literary form and must not be squeezed into a poorly fitting mold.”<sup>13</sup>

The contrived false account (28:11-5) of a plot by which the soldiers were paid to invent a story that the disciples came in the night and took Jesus' body is countered by the true record of Jesus'

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<sup>12</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 72.

<sup>13</sup> D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” 592.

resurrection appearance and great commission to his disciples in Matthew 28:16-20. Gundry comments that the δέ of verse 16 “...contrasts the false assertion that the disciples stole Jesus’ body with the truth of Jesus’ appearance to the eleven disciples.”

The “eleven” may already have been alluded to previously in chapter 28 but with different designations. The designations would be “his disciples” in 28:7, 9, and “my brethren” in 28:10. The term “eleven” is used in a couple other references appearing in Mark and Luke, namely Mark 16:14 and Luke 24:9, 33. This of course refers to the twelve minus Judas. We are told in Matthew 28:16 that the “eleven” went to a mountain in Galilee. The name of the mountain is not given. The appointment had been made previously according to Matthew 28:7, 10. The details as to the where-a-bouts of the mountain were not given in the previous statements but they somehow were aware of the location. They may have met there before but in some way it was familiar to them.

The two responses recorded in Matthew 28:17 are curious. While some “worshipped” (προσεκυνησαν) others doubted ( “some doubted” οἱ δε εδιστασαν). Mark reminds us that some of the disciples were hesitant in their confidence in the fact that Christ was risen from the dead according to Mark 16:14. The account of the doubting disciples is not inconsistent with a pattern of doubt among the disciples of Christ at the beginning ( “Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their *unbelief*...”). We all know of “doubting Thomas” according to John 20:27 and also of the reaction of the disciples when they are first told of the fact that their Lord lives again according to Luke 24:8-11.

### Primary Word Analysis

This section will be comprised of a brief analysis of the primary words found in Matthew 28:18-20. Later more consideration will be given to the implications of this analysis.

The first word to consider is the word, ἑξουσία. It is a noun, nominative, feminine, singular. The word translated, “authority,” is used sixty times in the New Testament. ἑξουσία appears in the Gospel of Matthew ten times. The references in Matthew are as follows: 7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1; 21:23

(two times), 24, 27; 28:18. Of these ten occurrences only 8:9 and 10:1 are not directly related to the power of our Lord. Matthew 8:9 is used of the commander of one hundred (“centurion”) describing his own authority. Matthew 10:1 is in reference to the authority given to the twelve disciples as they were sent out to announce the program of the “kingdom of heaven.” The remaining references all relate to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The same word is in Daniel 7:14 in the Septuagint. The student may wish to compare Matthew 24:30.

Regarding the “power” issue Robert Culver writes, “what is the “all power” Christ claims and what is the significance of “is given unto me” in that connection? It is the power of deity assumed by Him at His resurrection and ascension and has regard to the human nature only, since as regards His divine nature “all power” had been His always. So agrees Schaff. On the other hand, it may simply be an assertion of his “eternal power and Godhead” as “Son of man.” This is the force of Alford’s suggestion that it is derived from the Son of man prophecy in Daniel 7:13-14. Scholarship is pretty well agreed that “Son of man” is a divine title of Jesus with messianic connotations. It was to prepare the disciples to expect His power to be with them in their difficulties and weakness as they proceeded to evangelize the nations.”<sup>14</sup>

The second word to be considered is πορευθέντες which is an aorist, passive, deponent, masculine, plural, participle from πορεύω. This means “act or make to go, carry, convey.”<sup>15</sup> Even though it is obvious it should be pointed out at this juncture that this verb is not an imperative. In regard to this key word Carson comments that while “it remains true to say that the main imperative force rests with “make disciples,” not with “go,” in a context that demands that this ministry extend to “all nations” it is difficult to believe that “go” has lost all imperative force.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>. Culver, “What is the Church’s Commission?” 242.

<sup>15</sup>. Liddell-Scott, *The Abridged Liddell-Scott Greek-English Lexicon* (Bible Works, 2002).

<sup>16</sup>. Carson, *op. cit.*, 595.

The third word to be briefly analyzed is, in fact, the only word in this great commission passage in the imperative form. The word is μαθητεύσατε. This form is only used one time in the New Testament, namely, Matthew 28:19. Its root, μαθητής, is translated, “disciple,” and it is used 69 times in the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 10:1 and 11:1 the word refers to the twelve disciples in particular. In Matthew 28:16 reference is made to the eleven disciples.

D.A. Carson comments that the “...main emphasis, then, is on the command to “make disciples,” which in Greek is one word, “matheteusate,” normally an intransitive verb, here used intransitively.” He quotes Broadus in defining this command more precisely in stating “to disciple a person to Christ is to bring him into the relation of pupil to teacher, ‘taking his yoke’ of authoritative instruction (11:29), accepting what he says as true because he says it, and submitting to his requirement as right because he makes them.’ Carson goes on to say, “disciples are those who hear, understand, and obey Jesus’ teaching (12:46-50).”<sup>17</sup>

Kittel observes that “in the NT μαθητής occurs only in the Gospels and Acts...μαθητής denotes the men who have attached themselves to Jesus as their Master. In the Gospels association with Him is in these cases either expressly mentioned or to be assumed from the context. Acts has an absolute use of μαθητής in the sense of a disciple of Jesus...this developed within the community, and it thus represents a distinctively Christian use...”<sup>18</sup>

As has already been stated μαθητεύσατε carries the unique distinction of being the only imperative in the Matthew 28:16-20 paragraph. Roy B. Zuck makes the following observation about this word, “the use of matheteo in Matthew 28:19 is interesting. It is the one command in Matthew 28:19-20; the other verbal forms (“go,” “baptizing,” and “teaching”) are all present participles. “Go ye therefore” should be rendered, “Therefore as ye are going.” The suggestion is that wherever the disciples go, they should make disciples, and the way to make disciples is by baptizing them (implying and testifying to

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<sup>17</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>. Gerhard K. Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 441.

personal acceptance of Christ) and instructing (*didaskontes*) them. The making of a disciple of Christ, then, includes leading him to Christ as Savior, helping him make public profession of that faith, and teaching him to observe or practice all the things commanded by Christ. As A. B. Bruce explains: “*didaskontes* [is a] present participle, implying that Christian instruction is to be a continuous process, not subordinate to and preparing for baptism, but continuing after baptism with a view to enabling disciples to walk worthily of their vocation--therein: the teaching is with a view not to *gnosis* but to practice; the aim not orthodox opinion but right living.”

The noun *maqhtew* “disciple or pupil,” is used of the twelve disciples of Jesus (e.g., Matt. 10:1), of Jesus’ followers in general (e.g., Luke 6:17), of individuals such as Ananias (Acts 9:10), Timothy (Acts 16:1), and Mnason (Acts 21:16). In the Gospels “the disciples” sometimes refers to the Twelve (Matt. 13:10). In the book of Acts the term “the disciples” usually refers to Christians in general (Acts 6:1, 7).

The word *maqhtoi* suggests those who accept the teachings of someone and become his followers. It involves not only learning about the teachings of the instructor but being loyal followers of that one and His teachings. Such are true disciples of Christ - those who know His teachings and are loyal followers of Him.<sup>19</sup>

There are two present active participles in the text under consideration. The first one is βαπτίζοντες and the second of the pair is διδάσκοντες. The first of the couplet is a present, active, participle from βαπτίζω meaning “to immerse.” The two main usages of this term related to the believer in this church age should be referenced at this point, namely, water baptism, which is ritual, and Spirit baptism, which is real.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit occurs when the believer is placed into the Body of Christ at the time of his or her salvation experience. This event is spoken of in such passages as First Corinthians 12:13 and Ephesians 4:5.

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<sup>19</sup> Roy B. Zuck, “Greek Words for Teach,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122, no. 486 (April 1965): 163, CD.

Water baptism is an ordinance of the local church derived from the command of our Lord and the practice of the Church in the New Testament. The practice of water baptism for new believers is seen on many occasions in the book of Acts (i.e. Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 13, 16; 10:47-48). The reference in First Peter 3:21 is to water baptism. In this passage Peter reminds the reader that there is no efficacy in mere ritual.

The second present participle, διδασκότες, is also a present active verb. It is from διδάσκω and means “teach” or “instruct.” Thayer defines it “to hold discourses with others in order to instruct them, deliver discourses.”<sup>20</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, in commenting on these two present participles, states, “the truly subordinate participles in v. 19 explain what making disciples involves: “baptizing” them and “teaching” them obedience to all of Jesus’ commandments. The first of these will be a once-for-all, decisive initiation into Christian community. The second proves a perennially incomplete, life-long task.”<sup>21</sup>

Gundry makes the comment that in “...parallelistic style typical of Matthew, the participial phrases “teaching them” and “baptizing them” match each other (cf. 4:23; 9:35 for this structure).”<sup>22</sup>

The combination of bringing individuals to Christ ( “maqhteusate panta ta e@qnh ) as well “baptizing them” and “teaching them” comprise the whole scope of Christian missions for this present Church age.

A. Boyd Luter summarizes the one imperative and the two participles in the Great Commission as follows, “the purpose of the Great Commission as stated in Matthew 28:19-20 is seen in the imperative “make disciples” (maqhteusate). This is to be accompanied by “going,” and involves the two steps indicated by the parallel participles “baptizing” (baptivzonte) and “teaching” (didavskonte). Disciple-making involves (a) winning others to Christ (“baptizing” implies their conversion, for water baptism was

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek - English Lexicon* (IBT, 1998-2000).

<sup>21</sup> Blomberg, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture NIV Text*, 431.

<sup>22</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982), 597.

an outer witness of inner conversion) and (b) teaching the commands of Christ. "Christian instruction is to be a continuous process . . . continuing after baptism with a view to enabling disciples to walk worthily of their vocation."<sup>23</sup>

The last phrase is a strategic one when considering the implications of Matthew 28:19-20 for this present age. The phrase is as follows, “kai > i]dou > e]gw > meq ] u[mw?n ei]mi pa < saj ta < j h[me < raj e!wj th?j suntelei < aj tou? ai]w?noj.” The student of the Bible immediately will take note of the fact that Jesus’ promised presence is emphatic, namely, “...e]gw meq ] u[mw?n ei]mi...”

The NIV renders this phrase in the following manner, “And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”

This is a defining statement in this passage with regard to its application for the Church age. Jesus promises His presence to the absolute consummation of the age. D.A. Carson comments, “the English adverb “always” renders an expression found in the New Testament only here...strictly “the whole of every day”...not just the horizon is in view but each day as we live it. This continues to the end of the age...the end of history as we know it.”<sup>24</sup> I would disagree that the termination of Christ’s presence in this particular context would be at the “end of history as we know it.” The expression “...e!wj th?j sunteleiaj tou? ai]w?noj” is literally translated “even to the end of the age” and is in fact a promise that Christ will be with the Church until the consummation of the Church age as it carries out its mission He outlined in Matthew 28:19-20. This same presence is intimated by Christ’s promise that He will build His Church given previously in Matthew 16:18. The parameters of this pledge does not imply Christ’s presence during the Tribulation period. The Church will be removed prior to this time of judgment. The consummation of the Tribulation period will be the Second Coming of Christ to the earth. The “end” of that period is described in Matthew 24:14 ( “...kai > to < te h!cei to > teloj” ). The mission of the Church

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<sup>23</sup> A. Boyd Luter, “Discipleship And The Church,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (July-September 1980): 270, CD.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, op. cit., 599.

will be over before the Great Tribulation period approaches. The “end” described in First Corinthians 15:24 ( “ei#ta to> te<loj...” ) takes place at the end of the millennial kingdom. The Church will not be involved in a missionary endeavor during the millennial kingdom. The “end of the age” in Matthew 28:20 does not fit into the context of either the Tribulation period culminating in the glorious Second Coming of Christ to the earth or the context of the millennial culminating in the delivering up of the kingdom to God, the Father.

The duration of Christ’s promised presence I believe is significant since a new era is about to begin, namely, the inauguration of the Church age (Acts 2). Christ had referred to this new program in Matthew 16:18. The simple future tense used in this passage, oi]kodomh<sw, points to the fact that the Church at that point was not yet in existence but was yet to be established in the future. The Church Jesus referred to in Matthew 16:18 began on the day of Pentecost described in Acts 2.

Craig Blomberg states, “Acts 2 will describe the decisive moment of fulfillment of the promise at Pentecost. Matthew chooses to leave his readers here. The disciples represent everyone in the church to which he writes and, derivatively, everyone who professes to follow Christ in any age. The Lord is now risen! He calls His people to become disciple makers, and he promises to be with them irrespective of their successes or failures.”<sup>25</sup>

The promise made by our Lord in Matthew 28:20 was connected to this new program. Israel had rejected their Messiah culminating in His death on the cross followed by His resurrection from the dead. Romans 10:4 is a wonderful reminder that the death of Christ is the absolute end (teloj) of the Law for the believer.

Israel, as a result of this rejection of Jesus, was still yet to face the worst of all judgments that would come upon this planet. Just prior to the Olivet Discourse recorded in Matthew 24 Jesus issued this solemn accusation and denunciation, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy

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<sup>25</sup>. Blomberg, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture NIV Text*, 433.

children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:37-39).

The Olivet Discourse recorded in Matthew 24 showcases the time of “Jacob’s troubles” more popularly known as the Great Tribulation period detailed more fully in Revelation 6-19. The event immediately following these terrible seven years is described in the phrase stated in Matthew 23:39, namely, “Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” The Second Coming of Christ to the earth will follow this Great Tribulation period (compare Matthew 24:30; Daniel 7:13-14; Zechariah 14:1-4).

If the Gospel of Matthew was written somewhere between A.D. 50-60 Matthew was already in the Church age twenty years or more. The context of Matthew’s own time period even during the penning of this Gospel was the Church age and therefore the “end of the age” should have been understood as the end of the dispensation of time in which Matthew found himself.

Robert Culver has provided the following paraphrase of the Great Commission and it is as follows, “ The eleven disciples went into Galilee as Jesus in Judea had previously directed them (Matt. 28:7). There he appeared to the eleven again, commanding them to gather with other disciples of the area on a certain mountain. In obedience over 500 came (1 Cor. 15:6). Verse 17 [Matt. 28:17]. And when these beheld him (idonte, aor. 2, nom. pl. mase. part. of oraw) they worshipped him. There were some of the crowd, however, who doubted if it were really the resurrected Christ, whom they saw.

Verse 18 [Matt. 28:18]. Then Jesus, having come closer to the assembled group, talked freely with them saying, As the God-Man, now having finished the provision of redemption, there has been committed to me by the Godhead universal power, operative equally in heaven and on the earth.

Verse 19 [Matt. 28:19]. As ye go, therefore, and wherever you may be, as my disciples (Mark 16:20; Acts 2:9-11; Acts 8:1, etc.) in this world, make disciples of all the nations, for I

have authority among them all. You are to begin making disciples by instructing (not excluding witnessing, preaching, and evangelizing) men. Men thus informed by you and convinced by the Holy Spirit of the truth as it is in Christ and who wish openly to confess their submission to the Lordship of the Triune God are to be baptized in the name of the Father, and (in the name) of the Son, and (in the name) of the Holy Ghost. After baptism they are further to be instructed in all the teachings of Christianity. They should guard these truths in their own lives.

Verse 20 [Matt. 28:20]. I will be with you individually and wherever two or three are gathered in my name as you carry out this commission until the full end of the age at my return.<sup>26</sup>

#### Early Church Witnesses To The Application Of Matthew 28:19-20

It is relevant to the subject at hand to include statements of the early Church Fathers with regard to their view of the Great Commission. Did they consider the Matthew 28:19-20 passage as being applicable to the Church and the Church age? Was it considered a strategic passage with regard to the mission model for the Church? Were these words considered as a command for the Church to fulfill or was the mission already considered accomplished? Some of the answers may be only in the form of a hint or insinuation according to the testimonies of some of the early writers in the Church. It seems that the general consensus among these writers was that Matthew 28:19-20 was indeed relevant. It is fairly clear that there exists, among the early Church writers, an understanding that the Church is to carry out its mission as outlined by our Lord in the Great Commission.

Ignatius, a second century writer, in his “Epistle to the Philadelphians” states, “But the Gospel possesses something transcendent [above the former dispensation], viz. the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, His passion, and the resurrection itself. For those things which the

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<sup>26</sup> Robert D. Culver, “What is the Church’s Commission?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2 125 (July 1968): 499, CD.

prophets announced saying, “Until He come for whom it is reserved, and He shall be the expectation of the Gentiles,” have been fulfilled in the Gospel, [our Lord saying,] “Go ye and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>27</sup>

Another second century writer, Tertullian, in “Against Heresies,” states, “Now, the Gentiles knew nothing either of Him, or of any of His promises. Therefore it was to Israel that He spake when He said, “I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Not yet had He “cast to the dogs the children’s bread; not yet did He charge them to “go into the way of the Gentiles.” It is only at the last that He instructs them to “go and teach all nations, and baptize them” when they were so soon to receive “the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, who should guide them into all truth.”<sup>28</sup>

In an article by Robert L. Thomas entitled, “Historical Criticism And The Great Commission,” he cites some additional remarks uttered by Tertullian regarding Matthew 28:19-20. One is “regarding Jesus’ instructions to His disciples” and it is as follows, “Accordingly, after one of these had been struck off, He commanded the eleven others, on His departure to the Father, to “go and teach all nations, who were to be baptized into the Father, and into the Son, and into the Holy Ghost.”<sup>29</sup>

Thomas also quotes Tertullian’s remarks found in “Against Praxeas” in which Tertullian states, “After His resurrection He promises in a pledge to His disciples that He will send them the promise of His Father; and lastly, He commands them to baptize into the Father and the Son

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<sup>27</sup>. A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume One* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 85.

<sup>28</sup>. A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume Three* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959), 247.

<sup>29</sup>. Robert L. Thomas, “Historical Criticism And The Great Commission,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 11 (Spring 2000): 41.

and the Holy Ghost, not into an unipersonal God. And indeed it is not once only, but three times, that we are immersed into the Three Persons, at each several mention of Their names.<sup>30</sup>

A writer in the first half of the third century, Clement of Rome, in “Recognitions of Clement, penned the following, “Our Lord when He sent us apostles to preach, enjoined us to teach all nations the things which were committed to us...our commission is not to speak, but to teach those things which are from them to show how every one of them rests upon truth.”<sup>31</sup>

In “The Epistles of Cyprian” Cyprian writes the following with regard to Great Commission passage, “The Lord, when, after the resurrection, He sent forth His apostles, charges them, saying, “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”<sup>32</sup>

In his same epistle Cyprian is quoted by Thomas stating, “Lest therefore we should walk in darkness, we ought to follow Christ, and to observe His precepts, because He Himself told His disciples in another place, as He sent them forth, “All power is given unto me in heaven and earth, Go, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”<sup>33</sup>

In his article in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* Thomas provides a general summary of the citations he provides from some of the early Church Fathers references to Matthew 28:19-20. He concludes, “the unanimity of opinion among the earth fathers that Jesus spoke the words of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> A. Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. Eight (1959), 319.

<sup>32</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Historical Criticism And The Great Commission,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* I, no. Spring (2000): 42.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

the Great Commission is completely obvious. They took the statements of the Great Commission at face value, without ever questioning that they represented historical fact. No one issues even the slightest hint that someone else put these words into Jesus' mouth. That He is the historical source of the Commission is unquestioned."<sup>34</sup>

I would add to this summation that it is also obvious these early church writers also viewed Matthew 28:19-20 as a strategic and relevant mandate for the mission program of the Church and was obligatory upon every believer to carry out with the great urgency.

In an article entitled, "Teaching Them to Observe All that I Have Commanded You: The History of the Interpretation of the Great Commission and Implications for Marketplace Ministries, John Jefferson Davis argues the following premise that from the early church Matthew 28:18-20 has been "obscured by the ecclesiastical controversies of the day." Davis is professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

The article primarily argues the premise that even from the early church the meaning of Matthew 28:18-20 has been obscured by the "ecclesiastical controversies of the day."<sup>35</sup><sup>36</sup> Davis proceeds to demonstrate this assertion by citing the improper emphases from this passage down through the centuries. He begins by pointing to indicators in the early church that many believed the Great Commission was fulfilled by the Apostles in their life time. He postulates that patristic period was dominated by concerns with regard to the nature of proper forms of baptism and controversies relating to the doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>34</sup>. Ibid., 43.

<sup>35</sup>. John Jefferson Davis, "Teaching Them to Observe All Things I Have Commanded You," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 25, no. No. 1 (January 2001): 66.

<sup>36</sup>. Ibid., p. 66

Pointing to the fourth century A.D. he cites Athanasius' use of the Great Commission in the context of the great Trinitarian controversies of that period. Davis presents the contribution of the middle ages in the Trinitarian and Baptism motif as well.

He further asserts that the seventh century dominant view among the Protestants was that the Great Commission was “no longer binding on the Church.”<sup>3738</sup> The reason provided for this assertion was once again the view that the Apostles had finished the task.

This article finally calls for the Church to take the Great Commission “seriously” with regard to its application. His concluding statement that “the horizontal extension of the kingdom through foreign missions and evangelism must be empowered by the vertical penetration of the kingdom in every dimension of life if the Great Commission is to be truly fulfilled in our day...” highlights a crucial hermeneutical and biblical conflict with regard to the correct meaning and, therefore, application of Matthew 28:18-20.<sup>39</sup> Are we in fact “building the kingdom” by carrying out the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20? Is this part of the “kingdom program” or the mandate for the Church to accomplish?

This crucial question and issue in regard to the text under discussion will be addressed later.

#### The Different Opinions on Matthew 28:19-20

From anti Great Commission to an irrelevant Great Commission to disagreement on emphasis and purpose the opinions are many and varied in regard to this strategic passage of

Scripture and its application to the Church and its mission in the twenty-first century.

Mark Smith is a self proclaimed anti-Christian “dedicated to deprogramming Christians from Christianity, fundees from fundamentalism, (and) providing atheistic ammo for

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<sup>37</sup>. Ibid., p.72.

<sup>38</sup>. Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>39</sup>. Ibid., p. 72.

freethinkers.” He obviously loathes the “great commission” and Christianity. On his website he asserts that “it is because of this “great commission” that many modern Christians have an almost obsessive compulsion to shove their religion down your throat, your objections notwithstanding.”<sup>40</sup>

In the same short piece he postulates the notion that the “Great Commission” was never meant for anyone other than a few apostles in the first century.

For those of us who believe the Matthew 28:16-20 passage of Scripture is relevant for the Church he charges that such an assumption is based on the false premise that the “Great Commission” was “a generic command, equally binding upon all Christians for all time.” He then dismisses this assumption as “absurd.”<sup>41</sup>

We may conclude, however, with some conviction that Mark Smith’s vantage point is a typical reaction representative of the view held by the great masses of unbelievers that inhabit our planet. There should be very little, if any, shock or surprise on the part of the believing community when considering the animosity of the unbelieving community toward the proclamation of a message and a person they have utterly rejected. This adamant rejection of the basic Christian assumptions of the “great commission” only confirms the cosmic nature of our spiritual battle.

Leaving the anti-Christian perspective others, under the Christian umbrella, postulate (and some of this has been addressed earlier with regard to various emphases stressed through the “Great Commission” throughout Church history) that the “Great Commission” argues for “baptismal regeneration” or the position that Matthew 28:19-20 has already been fulfilled, namely in the first century A.D.

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Smith, “The Great Commission Does Not Apply” (2003), 1, [Www.jcnot4me.com](http://www.jcnot4me.com).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.

In a short piece entitled, “Was the Great Commission Fulfilled,” published on the Internet by Jonathan Crosby, Crosby writes “we see by the testimony of Scripture, the Great Commission that Jesus gave to the eleven disciples in Mark 16:15 was accomplished by His apostles during their lifetimes in the first century A.D. The Great Commission has been fulfilled!”<sup>42,43</sup> This website is produced by an unaffiliated church located in Greenville, S.C. The name of the church is The Church at Greenville. The doctrinal position explained on their webpage does not indicate dispensational doctrinal perspective.

The same position, however, regarding the relevance or should I say non-relevance of the “Great Commission” is held by the ultra or hyper-dispensationalists. This school of thought postulates that the Gospels are completely Jewish and their contents is not applicable to the Church age. This assumption includes the Matthew 28:16-20 passage as well as the Great Commission passages in the remaining three Gospels. Ultra-dispensationalism has also been dubbed “Bullengerism.” Such a view rejects water baptism as an ordinance of the Church.

On the “authority” question Pastor Brian M. Schwertly “pushes the envelope” in an article published on the web entitled, “The Great Commission.” Brian Schwertly is pastor of the Chalcedon Christian Church in Haslett, Michigan. A description of his church is provided on the same website. It is as follows: holding to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), Presbyterian, Theonomist, Postmillennial, Presuppositional.

Schwertly asserts Christ received His authority when He rose from the dead. Pastor Schwertly in his article states, “Jesus...having won the war is given all authority...(which He then)...delegates to the Church.” Schwertly continues by writing that “...the Church is to command all nations to kiss the Son, to submit to the King of kings and Lord of lords, “for He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet (I Cor. 15:25).”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42.</sup> Jonathan Crosby, 1, [www.Letgodbettrue.com](http://www.Letgodbettrue.com).

<sup>43.</sup> Ibid

<sup>44.</sup> Brian M. Schwertly, “The Great Commission” (2003), 6, [www.reformonline.com](http://www.reformonline.com).

The same kind of terminology heard in the old postmillennialists' jargon of a by-gone era is revisited as Schwertly attempts to "fire up" the troops to "bring in the kingdom." He proclaims, "Christians should march off to battle knowing that Christ has secured the victory, and that His omnipotence cannot be thwarted."<sup>45</sup>

The "theonomistic" flavor of his position is more forthrightly displayed in the following quotes:

"His (Christ's) "all authority" over "all the nations" demands we preach His crown rights over all men and all their institutions, cultures, societies, and nations. The saving of multitudes of individuals must eventually lead to cultural Christianization under Christ's rule and to His glory by His providence, in conformity with God's creative purpose. This world order was designed to have man set over it, to the glory of God."

"The task is not completed until institutions, cultures and civil governments submit to the King of kings. This task is accomplished by spiritual and not physical means."

He also claims that a neglected truth is the fact that this task is to be undertaken by the ordained minister quoting reformed and Presbyterian commentators (i.e. David Dickson, 1647).<sup>46</sup>

In an article entitled, "An Evaluation of Theonomic Neopostmillennialism" Thomas D. Ice quotes Chilton in commenting on the "Great Commission." Chilton (a theologian) states, "...the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 does not end with simply witnessing to the nations. Christ's command is that we disciple the nations - all the nations. The kingdoms of the world are become the kingdoms of Christ. They are to be disciplined, made obedient to the faith. This means that every aspect of life throughout the world is to be brought under the lordship of

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<sup>45</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>. Brian M. Schwertly, article (2003), 6, [www.reformonline.com](http://www.reformonline.com).

Jesus Christ: families, individuals, business, science, agriculture, the arts, law, education, economics, psychology, philosophy, and every other sphere of human activity.”<sup>47</sup>

The Second Coming of Christ and the completion of the Great Commission are linked according to many. This position insists that Christ will not come back until the commission is completed. On a site published by the Grace Valley Christian Center an article entitled, “The Second Coming of Christ, part 3,” there is discussion on what must occur before Jesus comes back again. The writer of this piece, P.G. Mathew, states “...certain things must happen before Christ comes again, before this blessed hope of the church is fulfilled. First, the gospel must be authoritatively proclaimed in all the world (Matt. 24:14). Why? He has not come yet, Peter says, so that people may hear the gospel, repent of their sins and be saved before his coming (2 Pet. 3:9). We must be witnesses to this glorious gospel...the gospel must be proclaimed, and you and I have that responsibility. Christ cannot come until the gospel is proclaimed in all the world.”<sup>48</sup>

Grace Valley Christian Center is reformed and does not see any inconsistency with its interpretation of Matthew 24:14 and the fact that this passage is not related to the Church or its missions mandate given by our Lord in Matthew 28:19-20.

It may be well here to include a basic summary statement of the differences evident between the dispensationalist’s point of view on the Great Commission and that of postmillennialism and amillennialism. Robert Lightner in an article in *Bib Sac 2* quoted Bahnsen who stated, “the thing that distinguishes the biblical postmillennialist then from amillennialism and premillennialism is his belief that Scripture teaches the success of the great commission in this age of the church.” Lightner continues by adding, “Theonomists have an “optimistic confidence” that the nations of the world” will become disciples of Christ, and the church will

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<sup>47</sup>. Thomas D. Ice, “An Evaluation of Theonomic Neopostmillennialism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2 145 (July 1988): 298.

<sup>48</sup>. P.G. Mathew, *The Second Coming of Christ, Part 3* (1996), 2, [Www.dcn.davis.ca.us](http://www.dcn.davis.ca.us).

grow to fill the earth, and that Christianity will become the dominant principle...the Gospel will convert the vast majority of the world to Christ and bring widespread obedience to His kingdom rule.”<sup>49</sup>

Lightner then provides a summary quote by Rushdoony regarding this theonomistic view of the Great Commission. It is as follows, “Postmillennialism thus believes that man must be saved, and that his regeneration is the starting point for a mandate to exercise dominion in Christ’s name over every area of life and thought. Postmillennialism in its classic form does not neglect the church and it does not neglect also to work for a Christian state and school, for the sovereignty and crown rights of the King over individuals, families, institutions, arts, scientists, and all things else. More, it holds that God has provided the way for this conquest: His Law. Every word that God speaks is law; it is binding on man. Grace, love, and Law are only contraries in a pagan view; in God, they serve a common purpose, to further His kingdom and glory.”<sup>50</sup>

In what seems like a much milder approach and more the traditional reformed and Amillennial approach D.A. Carson comments on this authority issue as follows, “this well defined exercise of authority is given Jesus as climactic vindication of his humiliation (cf. Philippians 2:5-11); and it marks a turning point in redemptive history, for Messiah’s kingdom (i.e. his “king-dominion,” the exercise of his divine and saving authority...has dawned in new power).”<sup>51</sup>

Carson seemingly transforms the mission of the Church to preach the Gospel of Christ for the singular purpose of the salvation of the hearers and their subsequent training in the Word of God

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<sup>49</sup>. Robert Lightner, “Theonomy and Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 2 143 (January 1986): 31.

<sup>50</sup>. Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>. Carson, op. cit., 595.

and substitutes “kingdom building” instead. In addressing Christ’s promised presence until the end of the

Church age (the age at the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew) Carson comments that the phrase, “to the end of the age” is the “end of history as we know it, when the kingdom will be consummated.”<sup>52</sup>

The theonomist’s emphasis on the Law and its application to our world is all too familiar with the comparative emphases of the Islamic religion as spotlighted by our contemporary struggles in the light of September 11. Who of us could be trusted to implement the kind of militaristic restraints upon man outlined in such a “humanistic” theonomist approach? The dispensationalist would say that Christ alone is qualified and capable to rule in such a way. Biblical history has consistently taught us that the prophecies of Christ’s personal reign on this earth cannot come to pass apart from the personal intervention of the “King of kings” and the “Lord of lords.”

#### A Biblical Perspective On The Great Commission

In accessing the many ways to look at the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 one can be taken back and almost overcome with the varied emphases and interests propagated in the name of this strategic passage. From arguments for “loving one another more,” to “being a friend to another person,” to using the Great Commission to keep a person away from pornography, to using the Great Commission as a pretext for maintaining unity in the Church, the Great Commission (as was demonstrated in John Davis’ article, “Teaching Them to Observe All Things” ) can still be used to further one’s own cause, emphasis. and agenda.

This section focuses on the Great Commission’s significance and strategic place in regard to the Church’s mission and evangelical purpose. The following points will be examined, namely,

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<sup>52</sup>. Ibid.

its significance in Scripture, the purpose of the Great Commission, the place of the Great Commission in God's program.

The significance of the Great Commission in the Scripture.

Robert Speer is quoted by George Peters in a Bib Sac article entitled, "The Primacy of Missions," stating the following, "It is clear that the last command of Christ played no part at all in the first foreign missions of the church. There is no reference to it in Paul's epistles. No appeal was made to it in the issue over the admission of Gentiles to the Church."<sup>53</sup> Does this mean the Great Commission is irrelevant for the Church in this age as was advocated by some documented earlier in this paper? No! There is nothing written in the epistles which would subjugate or lessen the force of Christ words uttered in Matthew 28:19-20. The Great Commission's pattern for reaching the world for Christ was not replaced by Paul, Peter or John in any of their epistles. To the contrary it was re-inforced.

As was mentioned earlier the Great Commission appears five times in the Gospels and the book of

Acts. It appears in Matthew 28:18-20 (the focal point of the discussion in this paper), in Mark 16:15-19; Luke 24:46-49; John 20:21-22, as well as in the book of Acts, namely Acts 1:8. It is

also reiterated in the command to Paul in Acts 26:14-18 and rehearsed by him before king Agrippa. The primary command in the commission of Matthew 28:19-20 and the only imperative is "to make disciples." This clear command to bring others to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ continues to be the paramount stress throughout the epistles (i.e. 2 Corinthians 5:20 "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We employ you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God").

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<sup>53</sup>. George W. Peters, "The Primacy of Missions," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (October 1962): 336.

With regard to the purpose of the Great Commission it may be stated that one's hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures will significantly shift the "lay of the land" as far as what one sees as the purpose and the outcome of Matthew 28:19-20. The blurring of a distinction between the Church and Israel causes the covenant theologian (with his allegorical hermeneutic) to view the overriding purpose of the Great Commission as a mandate for kingdom building. The Great Commission can also be seen by the theonomistic minded postmillennialist as a mandate to change the culture of the world instead of viewing it (the Great Commission) as a counter-cultural mandate.

Hugh Thomson Kerr is quoted in "A Biblical Theology of Missions" by George W. Peters making a refreshingly crystal clear statement regarding the responsibility of the Church in accomplishing the Great Commission. It reads as follows, "We are sent not to preach sociology but salvation; not economics but evangelism; not reform but redemption; not culture but conversion; not progress but pardon; not new social order but a new birth; not revolution but regeneration; not renovation but revival; not resuscitation but resurrection; not a new organization but a new creation; not democracy but the gospel; not civilization but Christ; we are ambassadors not diplomats."<sup>54</sup>

As alluded to earlier, the examination of the book of Matthew using the normal literal hermeneutic will demonstrate that Israel, still maintaining its national entity, was given a clear offer of the kingdom promised often in the Old Testament. The offer of the messianic kingdom to Israel and the rejection of it by that nation did not metamorphize into a spiritual kingdom now called the Church. It is not the purpose of the Church to build the meditorial kingdom prophesied in the Old Testament to the nation of Israel. How could such a project be accomplished through the Church fulfilling the "great commission"? How could so many seemingly literal statements made in the Old Testament be changed into something with a different connotation altogether?

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<sup>54</sup>. George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 209.

Should we dignify such a hermeneutical shift by referring to it as “spiritualization?” If our purpose was to literally make this world a better place somebody has goofed big time. As Paul stated in Philippians, “that you may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom you shine as lights in the world: holding forth the word of life: that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain.”

According to the Great Commission the purpose for the Church to accomplish is to win others to a saving knowledge of Christ; to associate the new converts into a local church assembly; to train them then in the Word of God so that each may be equipped to live for Christ until He comes again to receive His Church from a world intensifying in its wickedness (Luke 18:8; I Tim. 4:1-4; 2 Tim. 3:1-9, 13; 2 Pet. 3:3).

It does not seem that one who reads of the purpose of the Church outlined in the New Testament as well as descriptions of the spiritual environment in which it carries out its obligation can be expected to come away with the notion that the millennial blessings, detailed in the Old Testament, will, as a fantastic fringe benefit, accompany the successful completion of the command.

Regarding the purpose George Peters writes, “Make disciples” is the dominant purpose according to Matthew in our mission ministries. The other gospels beautifully supplement and complete this all inclusive purpose by advancing four additional principles which lead up to making disciples. In order to accomplish the all inclusive purpose we are commanded: (1) to communicate the gospel intelligently and effectively to all nations and every creature. This is intensive and extensive evangelism. It is emphasized in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; (2) to lead people to an experiential knowledge of the salvation of God by receiving forgiveness of sins and the loosening power of the blood of Jesus Christ. This is personal regeneration and is emphasized by Luke and John; (3) to separate the convert and congregate them through the administration of baptism. This is congregationalism, church planting, and is implied in the words of Matthew and

Mark; (4) to lead them into the life and mind of Christ and the counsel of God by teaching them all things. This is indoctrination and is emphasized in Matthew. ”<sup>55</sup>

As we consider the purpose it is well to point to the fact that the scope of our mission outreach was defined by the Lord as being “all nations.” This is world-wide evangelism. The Church’s mission is global is scope.

In his book, “ Jesus and the Gospels,” Craig Blomberg provided an excellent sentence diagram of Matthew 28:19-20 to demonstrate the significance of the imperative, “make all nations disciples.” I, however, prefer the NIV rendering of the same phrase, “...make disciples of all nations.”<sup>56</sup>

At this point it would be well to be reminded of the four “alls” in the Great Commission, namely, pa?sa e]cousi < a, (v.18); pa < nta ta > e@qnh, (v. 19); threi?n pa < nta (v. 20); pa < saj ta > j h[me < raj (v. 20).

The Great Commission is all encompassing in its scope. Our authority to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth from Jesus Christ who is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18). Jesus Christ is the builder and architect of His Church according to Matthew 16:18 (compare Acts 2:47).

The parameters of the mission field of the Church was laid out by our Lord in the Great Commission as “all the nations.” The phrase in Acts 1:8, “...even to the remotest part of the earth” (NASB), is in harmony with this mandate for the Church. The Apostle Paul’s evangelistic zeal to reach out to the other nations with the good news of salvation through the sacrifice of Christ for the sin penalty of all men is apparent throughout his thirteen epistles. One such example is found in Romans 1:13-16, “I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I

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<sup>55</sup>. George W. Peters, “Let the Missionary Be a Missionary,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 122 (October 1965): 354.

<sup>56</sup>. Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus And The Gospels* (Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1997), 397.

have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. (14) I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. (15) So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome, (16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (NASB).

This same sort of evangelistic fervor and outlook is evident also in such passages as 2 Corinthians 10:14-16, “(14) For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; (15) not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men’s labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, (16) so as to preach the gospel even to regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another (NASB).”

Our ministry to those who are congregated into local churches as a result of their conversion to Christ is to indoctrinate them in the instructions of Christ. Paul commanded his own convert, the young Timothy, to pass these teachings along to others. Four generations are mentioned in Second Timothy 2:2, “...the things that thou has heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” In his last message he exhorts Timothy to, “...preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

The Apostle Peter in his last epistle, namely Second Peter 3:2, urges the reader to “...be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandments of us the apostles of the Lord and Savior.”

John in First John 5:2-3 comments that “by this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. (3) For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not greivous.”

The implementation of this phrase of the Great Commission will take the rest of our lives unlike the other aspects of the Great Commission. “Baptizing them” denotes water baptism. This is one of two church ordinances, the other being the Lord’s Supper. Water baptism is a picture of the believer’s union with Christ and signifies symbolically his or her induction into the Body of Christ and the local church. This ritual is performed generally one time in a believer’s life and is not repeated. It does not impart any sort of spiritual benefit to the participant. It is only a symbol or picture of what has already happened in the believer’s life, namely his or her salvation. The “teaching” process has no end but rather it is a life-long period of indoctrination in the Word of God which should serve as God’s instruction to sharpen and shape us into the image of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul connects the process of teaching and the anticipated result, “...speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: (16) From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh the increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” Phillips states Ephesians 4:15 as follows, “But we are meant to speak the truth in love, and to grow up in every way into Christ, the head.”<sup>57</sup>

Paul states that, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: (17) that the man of God might be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy 3:16-17).”

I believe Christ’s promised presence described by the following words, kai > i]dou e]gw > meq ] u[mw?n ei]mi pa < saj h[me < raj e!wj th?j suntelei < aj tou? ai]w?noj, is significant on many levels. Christ’s promise of His presence is emphatically made ( “...e]gw > ...ei]mi...). The Church is the Body of Christ and Christ is in us! Jesus promised that He would be with His Church until its consummation. It was to be a new dispensation and

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<sup>57</sup>. J.B. Phillips, *The New Testament In Modern English* (1958), 405.

Matthew 28:19-20 was spoken on the very threshold of its beginning, the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2.

The consummation of this age will be when the Church is taken away as described in First Corinthians 15:51-58 and First Thessalonians 4:13-18. The “end of the age” is not the Second Coming of Christ to the earth detailed in Matthew 24, Luke 21, or Revelation 19. The second phrase of the Second Coming described in those passages was revealed also in the Old Testament (i.e. Zechariah 14:1-4). The catching away of the Church was not. In fact Paul calls the consummation of the Church age a “mystery” in First Corinthians 15:51. It was not revealed previously, not even in the Gospel, unless John 14:1-4 is a reference to it.

If the date of the Gospel of Matthew is in the sixties, Matthew was already in the Church age around thirty years. Pentecost was a past event and the Church, in actuality, had been born. With regard to the duration of the Church age the “great commission” is time oriented. Its consummation will not be when “the last soul is saved.” Neither does the phrase, “end of the age” refer to the culmination of a kingdom building project happening incognito in this present evil world. Have you noticed lately? The world is not getting better! Islam is growing at a faster pace than Christianity. If the “kingdom” is indeed being advanced by carrying out of the “great commission” in order for such a movement to have credibility its accomplishments must be “spiritualized.” Such, however, is not the agenda of the “great commission.” The “end of the age” does not refer to a time when an earthly or “spiritual kingdom” is completed. The responsibility of the Church to complete its responsibility with regard to its mission mandate will end when Christ comes again in the air (the first phase of His Second Coming) to take His Church (His Bride) to be with Him. Then and only then can the Church rest from its prime goal of reaching the lost for Christ! “Snatching them out of the fire” so to speak (Jude 23, Phillips).

## Conclusion

The importance of the Great Commission is difficult to overstate. Its appearance in all four Gospels, the time setting in which it was given, the comprehensive nature of the command, its crystal clarity, particularly in Matthew 28:19-20, add up to the “great commission” being a mandate for the Church’s global mission and ministry. Although Paul, John, or Peter did not mention the commission specifically they, however, did compliment and re-enforce the contents of Matthew 28:19-20 throughout the rest of the New Testament in their definition of the nature and extent of the mission of the Church to the world.

The impact of this command given by our Lord two thousand years ago has not diminished in its urgency. The “great commission” was not accomplished by the Apostles, the need for men and women to come to Christ is as desperate as it has ever been. The Church is still the Body of Christ and the only ministry vehicle through which this mission is to be accomplished.

Our time to win others to Christ and to train them in the Scriptures is limited. It is limited not by the progress we have made in building a kingdom on this earth or by the number of individuals who have been saved. It is limited by the fact of Christ’s soon return. The “end of the age” will mean “mission accomplished” in regard to Christ’s global ministry through His Church.

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